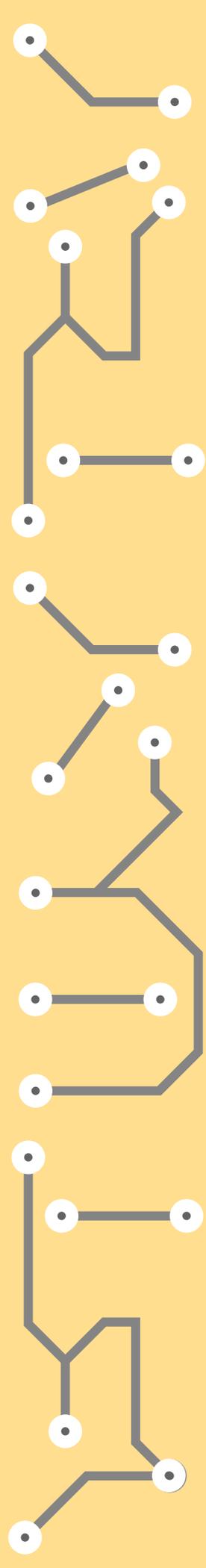
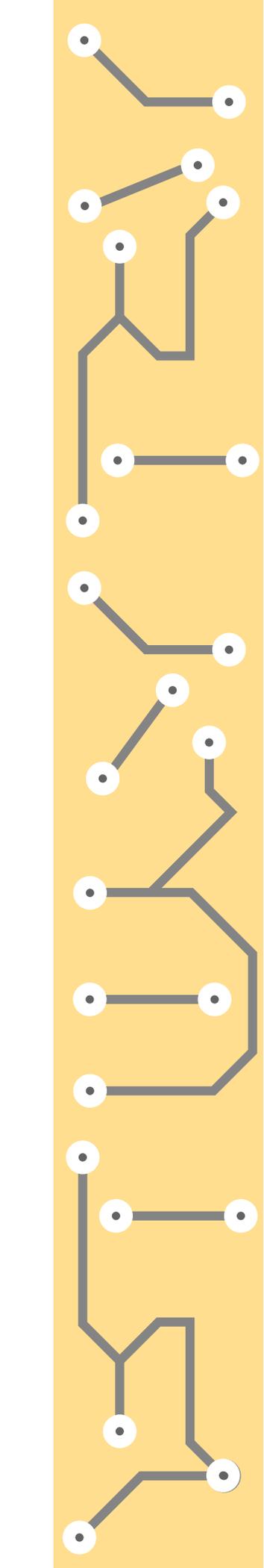


THINK, Volume 3 Identity

Jake Kircher



Dedicated to Pastor Tom.
Thanks for being there
in my crucial teenage years
and helping me answer the question
“Who am I?”



THINK, Volume 3

Identity

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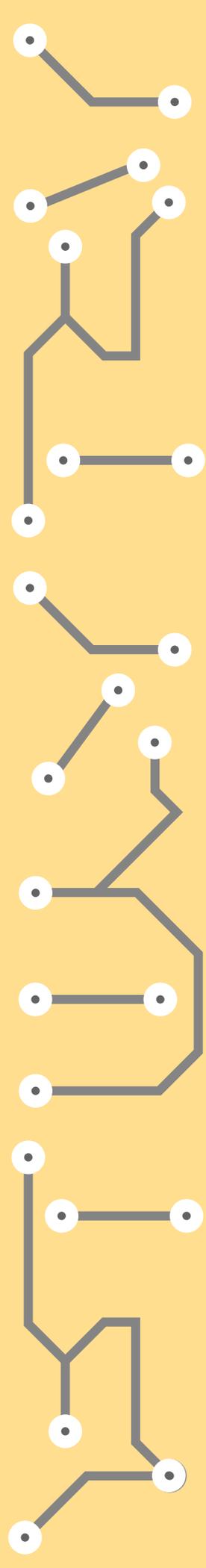
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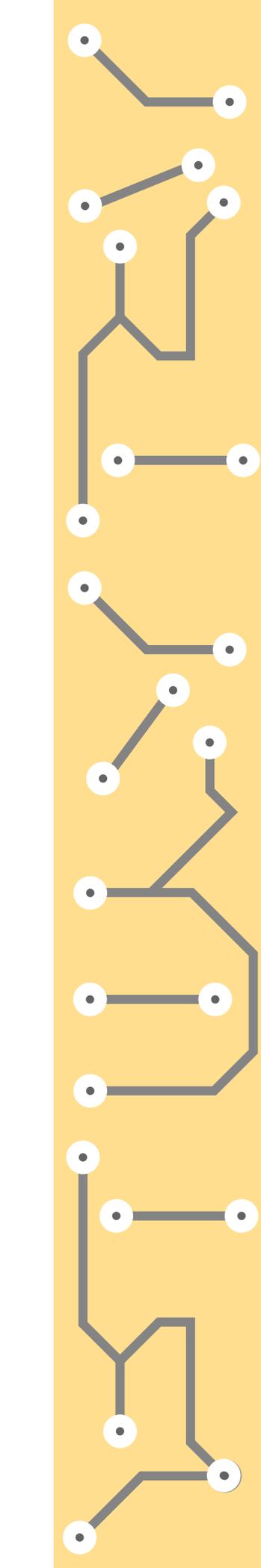
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How to Use the **THINK** Series

The studies within the THINK series are different from many Bible study resources in that they aren't intended to be "taught." Instead, **the role of the youth worker, small group leader, or volunteer is that of a facilitator.** Believe me, it's hard to stay in that role—especially for those who are gifted teachers. I still struggle with doing this myself!

To help with this, there are a number of things I'd recommend that I've begun practicing in my own ministry:

First, learn how to be a *part* of the conversation with your youth. Ask a lot of questions. Use the materials provided as prompts and allow teenagers to discuss and talk as much as possible. When a teen asks a good question, resist the urge to dive in and answer it. Instead, use the question to help the whole group think deeper by pulling a Jesus and turning the question back to the group. Say something like: "Great question! What does everyone else think?"

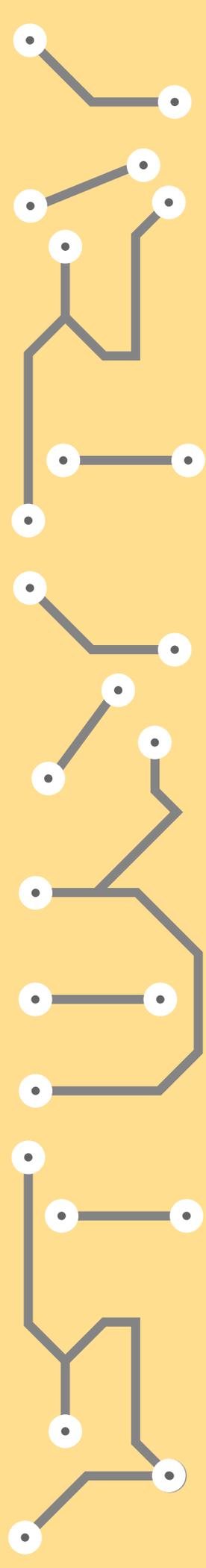
By facilitating and being a part of the group—not just teaching the group—you will not only help teenagers feel important and valuable, but you'll also be surprised about what you learn about God, faith, and the Bible. Honestly, every time I use this format rather than just teaching, I have my list of things that I want to make sure get put out there for the youth to consider. Yet, I rarely have to share those things myself because my teens bring up every point in a more natural way during the group discussion.

Now, that being said, this *does not mean* there's never a time to briefly (key word) teach or explain something to your group as part of the discussion. There will be times when, as the person who's taken the time to study the topic beforehand, you will need to explain the background of a passage you're discussing. In fact, I've provided thoughts like these throughout the curriculum (marked **NOTE**) for certain questions that are more likely to need further explanation.

The important thing to understand is that you should *always* do your best to give the youth a chance to answer first. (Always.) *Then* you can jump in and explain only when necessary. Honestly, you may be surprised how much your teens know about the historical context of the Bible. Even when they don't know, take the time to help teens figure out how to find the answers. So many great Bible tools are available for free online, and it's important that we teach teenagers how to study the Bible. Don't worry—I've helped you with this as well. At points throughout the curriculum, there are places where I encourage you to get teens to go online to different Bible resource websites such as *BlueLetterBible.com*, *BibleGateway.com*, and others.

There will be times when you ask a question and you're met with silence. When that happens, it's okay to jump in and provide some of your own thoughts. I highly recommend sharing a couple answers you've heard in response to that question—just to get teens thinking—and then turn it back to the youth and ask what they think. Another great way to handle a silent room is to prep volunteers beforehand and let one of them jump in and respond. Then you can ask the group if they agree or disagree with that response and why.

Second, make sure multiple people get the opportunity to share. As you facilitate



conversations, you'll most likely encounter certain people who tend to dominate the dialogue. (A person or two probably came to mind as you read that last sentence.) To avoid this scenario, an easy solution is to pose questions directly to those people in the group who haven't shared yet. However, it's important to let everyone know up front that they don't *have* to share and that "I don't know" is a perfectly valid answer. Many times when you get a noncommittal response like that, there's a good chance the person is simply processing the information being shared.

Third, *THINK* is all about challenging the typical answers. When you're talking about a subject, don't just present your church's "correct" theological answer. Instead, do your best to stay neutral in how you present the information. When someone shares an opinion, your best tool is going to be the question "Why?" Learn to play the devil's advocate and gently challenge them to defend what they're sharing. Ask them to explain their answers and back up their statements. By doing this, you'll help teenagers really think about what they're saying and what they believe.

Fourth, the contents of *THINK* are purposefully structured to be used as overall lessons, not single sessions. The reason for this is that sometimes you'll need more than a week to fully explore a conversation. Honestly, for some topics you could spend your entire youth group meeting talking through just the introduction options! The goal is not to complete the materials in any particular amount of time. Allow your group to set the pace and determine whether a topic takes one week or multiple weeks to cover.

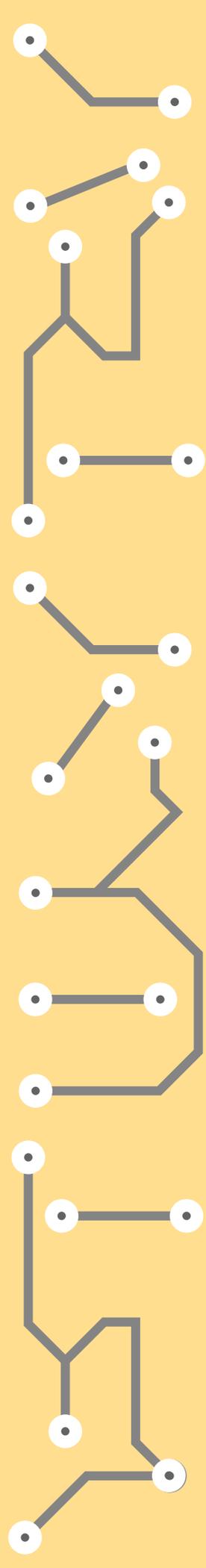
You can decide in which order you want to have the six conversations as well. You can use a particular lesson as a standalone conversation and then come back to the other ones another time, or you can do a series and go through the entire book, picking and choosing which order to do them in.

Fifth, avoid forcing a linear discussion based on the materials provided. Instead, allow your group to naturally direct the flow of the conversation. If you're discussing a Scripture passage and a teenager shares some thoughts that jump to a point made later in the materials, go with the flow and circle back later. Sometimes I don't have to be the one who circles back, as the youth will often do it on their own.

Sixth, *THINK* discussions are designed to leave people hanging. This will probably be the most difficult thing you have to do while using this curriculum. But when the conversation is nearing an end, resist the urge to reveal which answer is the "right" one. Instead, challenge everyone to keep wrestling with the issue. Utilize the Going Deeper handouts that include suggested Bible readings, books, articles, or websites that will help them continue processing the topic at home. Teach parents to carry on the dialogue after youth group and follow up with their teens to continue the conversation.

Please don't hear what I'm *not* saying. I'm *not* saying you should never take a theological stand from your perspective or never share your opinion. Again, this curriculum is designed to help adolescents think through their own beliefs, and sometimes one of the best ways to do that is by allowing them to hear different opinions—including yours.

However, I've found it's better not to share my perspective until someone specifically asks for it. Or I may wait to do it until I'm talking with a teenager one-on-one. The reason I do that is because too often when a pastor or ministry leader shares his or her opinion, the



conversation and thinking in the group tends to stop. Sometimes it's because of *how* we share it, but sometimes it's just because the teenagers assume the answer has been found and there's no more work to do.

When sharing our opinion isn't our primary mode of teaching, what we think about a given topic still tends to flow naturally into the conversation. This gives space for young people to process—as well as question—the perspective we're offering.

As far as a format for *THINK*, these materials could be used in almost any setting. You can use many of these prompts during one-on-one meetings with teens, but the materials will also work great in small groups. You can even use this curriculum in larger group settings, such as a church service, by simply allowing for interaction from the audience. (Check out this example of how it can be done: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UTXdlGxlko.) Or you can have the youth break off into smaller groups or just turn to the person sitting next to them and discuss something for a few minutes.

You'll find that the materials in each lesson are chock-full of ideas, prompts, and possibilities. Some of them will work well with your group, and some won't. That's okay. Again, the goal is simply to foster great conversation. So use what works for your group dynamics or setting, and ignore what doesn't.

Because it's ultimately the job of the Holy Spirit to bring about change, clarity, and conviction, I highly recommend putting together a prayer team of three to five people to lift up your group each week. This is a great way to get more people in your church, who may not have the time or desire to attend meetings and work hands-on with teens, involved with your ministry.

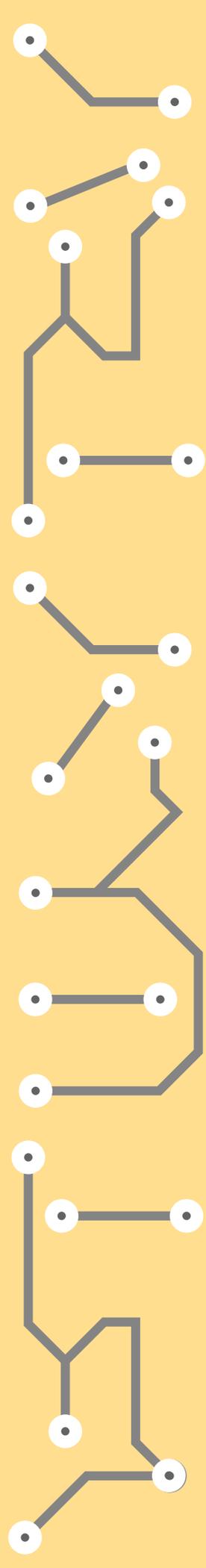
Once you have a team in place, simply send out an email each week with a brief recap of what happened the previous week, a description of the topic you'll be discussing in the coming week, and some specific prayer requests concerning your group's dynamics or specific teenagers.

Lastly, before you dive into discussions with your group, it will be very important that you establish some ground rules prior to your conversation—*especially* for the more controversial topics. The best way to do this is to allow your group to collectively come up with the rules before you begin the series. (Honestly, it would be a little weird if you started working your way through a curriculum that's all about fostering interaction and discussion by dictating the rules to the group.)

However, here are some rules that I suggest your group consider when making up their list:

1. Listen first, speak second. (See James 1:19.) Part of thinking critically is learning how to really listen to other people and process what they're saying, rather than just waiting to jump in with your own opinion.

2. Be tolerant and respectful of each other's views. This in no way means that members of the group have to act or talk like everyone's opinions are *right*. The word *tolerance* has been badly misused in our culture today, coming to mean that every opinion needs to be affirmed as being "right for you," even though viewpoints may contradict one another.



When I was in college, I had the opportunity to spend a couple days with John Perkins. He's known for his amazing work with racial reconciliation in the South, and he worked with Martin Luther King Jr. During one of our conversations, he bluntly shared that true tolerance is when, "You believe what you believe; I'll believe what I believe; and we won't kill one another." That has stuck with me. Teenagers should challenge and push one another's viewpoints, expressing when they disagree and think someone else is wrong. However, there's a respectful and loving way to do this. We don't need to model the poor response of some Christians who resort to name-calling, Bible-bashing, and writing someone off solely because they have different opinions.

3. Emotions are okay but keep them in check. With a few of the topics being covered, discussions could get heated. Keep in mind that emotions are good and God created them for a reason. On the one hand, you should challenge your group to be sensitive when someone gets emotional. There's a *reason* why our emotions come out of us. Oftentimes, yet probably unknown by the others in the room, a teen may be wrestling with a personal situation that's connected to a particular topic. So tread lightly and with love.

On the other hand, sometimes a person's emotions can hit a point where they aren't helpful to a conversation. If a teenager gets too emotional, give him or her permission to step out of the room for a bit or leave the gathering altogether. Sometimes thinking critically involves some necessary alone time in order to process what's going on beneath the surface. When a young person does need to leave, make sure a trusted peer (I highly encourage letting the youth minister to one another whenever possible) or a trusted adult, like you, reaches out to that teenager later on in the week to follow up. Perhaps it would be helpful to meet one-on-one to talk things through.

4. Don't gossip about what's shared during youth group. Sometimes in the midst of these discussions, teens will share why they believe certain things, and personal experiences or situations will also be shared. It's important to create an environment where the youth know they can safely share without fear of a certain story or information winding its way around school the next day. This means everyone must agree to show respect when others are being vulnerable.

I'm sure your group can come up with many more ground rules besides these four!

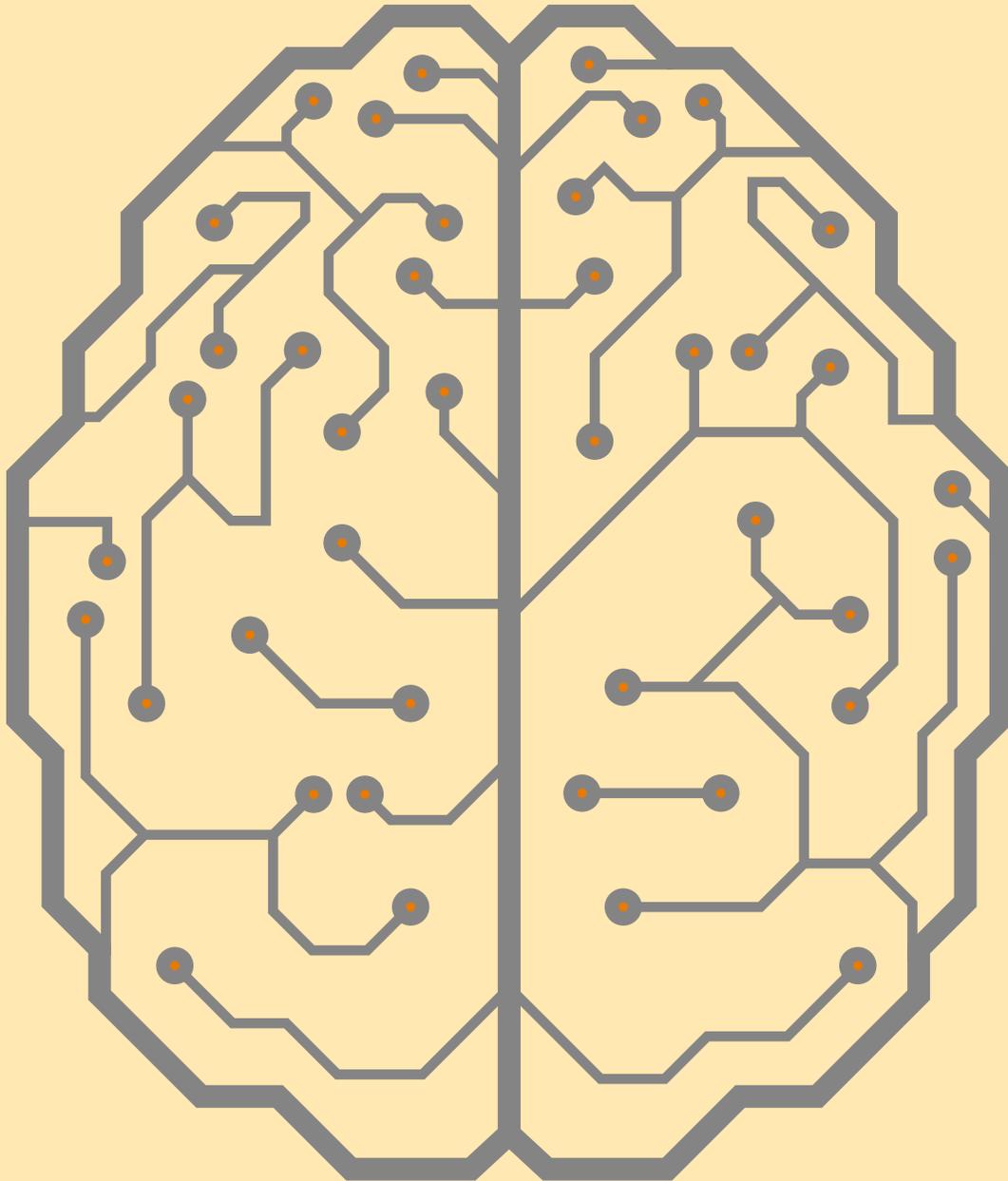
However, on top of coming up with some rules, it's also helpful to come up with the consequences if a particular rule isn't followed. This isn't to make the process legalistic, but simply to ensure the health of group discussions and protect personal feelings. As a good starting point for your broken-rule protocol, I recommend using the format for conflict resolution that Jesus lays out in Matthew 18:15-17.

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

All right, so now with all of that preliminary stuff out of the way, let's dive in...

Lesson 1

THINK III: Who Does the World Say You Are?



Lesson 1

THINK: Who Does the World Say You Are?

From a developmental stage, the question of “Who am I?” is easily one of the biggest and most important questions that teens ask throughout their adolescence. The answer to that question is crucial to their growth and maturity and will define what kind of man or woman they become in adulthood. Their identity formation will also dictate how they treat others in their future relationships, what kind of success they find in their careers, and the goals and desires they pursue as adults.

Needless to say, a part of the job description for every youth worker should be to come alongside our developing and questioning teens to help them discover who they really are—not based on opinions and feelings, but based on self-discovery and biblical truth. This process must begin, though, by helping young people identify the voices they are allowing to define who they are now. Only then can we begin to move forward and help them see themselves the way God sees them.

So this lesson is all about discovery and then the potential deconstruction of how teens would currently answer the question “Who am I?” As a fair warning, know that this could get rough for some of your youth. Some may not have much they need to deconstruct, but others may have quite a bit. Proceed with love, grace, and compassion for your teens as they begin the process of redefining who they are based on their Creator’s perspective.

Before Your Meeting

Study Materials

Here's a list of great resources and Scripture passages for you to familiarize yourself with as you prepare to facilitate your group's conversation. It will be important for you to purposefully explore some materials that hold a different viewpoint than yours.

Scripture Passages

NOTE: This specific lesson is not going to explore any Scriptural truths about identity. *Please know that this is NOT because it is not important or valued.* A Scriptural understanding of who God has made us each to be is crucial to a true and honest depiction of who we are. However, as stated in the introduction, the reason this lesson will not explore Scripture is because the lesson itself is deconstructive and self-evaluating in nature. The goal is to create a starting point to a much longer conversation while looking at the foundation of identity that your teens already have developed. For some, that will include Scriptural truth, but for others it won't. And especially for the ones who don't have a Scriptural foundation yet, we have to help them let go of the false things they believe about themselves before they can embrace and hold truth.

Think of it this way: Your youth are all holding defining elements of who they believe they are in their hands. Some are grasping very tightly to what they believe about themselves, and others hold things more loosely. But all of them are holding beliefs about themselves in some way. In order to put Scriptural truths into their hands, we have to first help them open their hands and let go of some of the things they have been holding on to that are not true. Without doing this first, you will simply be stuffing and forcing Scripture into their already crowded and clenched hands.

Helpful Websites

www.christianitytoday.com/le/2011/march-online-only/whoami.html

www.psychologytoday.com/search/apachesolr_search/%22who%20am%20i%22?keys=who%20am%20i&x=0&y=0 (a list of articles and blog posts written by psychologists on the topic of "Who Am I?")

www.teenink.com/search_google.php?q=who+am+i&x=0&y=0 (a list of articles written by teenagers on the subject of "Who Am I?")

www.robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-7-changing-the-tapes

Books

If you're going to read one book, I recommend you read either of these:

The Gifts of Imperfection by Brené Brown (Hazelden, 2010)

I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't) by Brené Brown (Gotham Books, 2007)

Other Great Options

Becoming Who You Are by Dutch Sheets (Bethany House, 2010)

Boundaries by Henry Cloud and John Townsend (Zondervan, 1992)

It's Not How You Look, It's What You See by Lisa Bevere (Charisma House, 2014)

The Storm Inside by Sheila Walsh (Thomas Nelson, 2014)

What We Talk About When We Talk About God by Rob Bell (HarperOne, 2013)

Promoting Your Meeting

Text/Twitter Prompts

Use these to help promote the upcoming conversation with your youth group.

- Who am I? This question has been asked since the beginning of time. See you tonight as we start to unpack this deep question together.
- How would you answer the question: Who are you? Looking forward to seeing you at group to discuss this important topic!
- Is who you are defined by things that you do? By what you wear? By what you own? What defines the essence of who you are?
- How does someone define who they are? Do some thinking before you come to group and be ready to share your thoughts.

Email to Parents

Here's a sample email you can rework to suit your own group, and then use it to let parents know about your upcoming conversation:

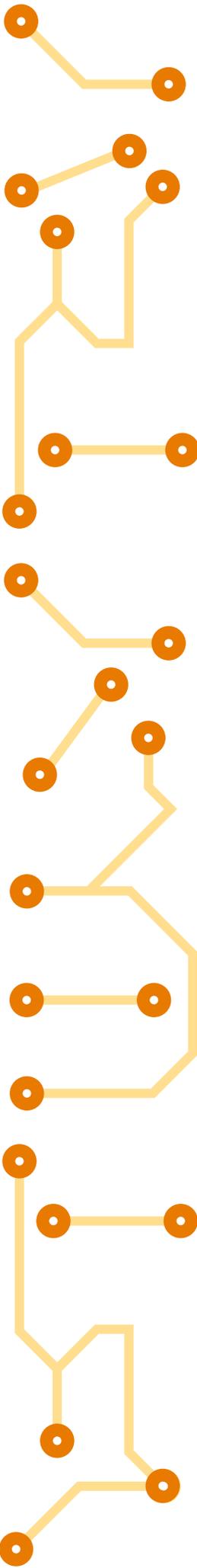
Dear Parents,

Over the next six weeks or so, we are going to be entering into a very important conversation with your kids. The question "Who Am I?" is one of the most-asked questions by every human since the beginning of time. Asking this is a crucial, developmental process all teenagers go through that impacts the men and women they become upon entering adulthood. We're really excited to purposefully come alongside your kids as they wrestle with this important life question.

*As we start the series this week, the goal is to create a starting point to a much longer conversation while looking at the foundation of identity that your teens have already developed. In other words, this week we want to help your kids self-evaluate and then discern if there are unhealthy aspects of their perceived identities that they need to let go of. Because of that, this specific lesson is not going to explore any Scriptural truths about identity. **Please know that this is NOT because it is not important or valued. A Scriptural understanding of who God has made us each to be is crucial to a true and honest depiction of who we are.***

Think of it this way: Your kids are all holding defining elements of who they believe they are in their hands. Some are grasping very tightly to what they believe about themselves, and others hold things more loosely. But all of them are holding beliefs about themselves in some way. In order to put Scriptural truths into their hands, we have to first help them open their hands and let go of some of the things they have been holding on to that are not true. Without doing this first, we will simply be stuffing and forcing Scripture into their already crowded and clenched hands.

As always, we want our discussion to be complementary to any conversation you've had or will have with your children. I've found these youth group discussions can really open up a door for more family



dialogue. That's why we challenge you to ask questions about what we discussed. Here are some suggestions:

- What do you think are the things that define who you are?
- Do you think there are more positive things you see about yourself or more negative? Why do you think that is?
- Are there aspects of how you see yourself that you feel you need to change? How can I help you do that?

We understand it may be difficult for you to hear some of the things your child may share, especially if they open up about not having a very good self-worth. But we challenge you to be “slow to speak and quick to listen” (James 1:19) as your child responds to your questions.

Please feel free to email or call me if you'd like to talk before our group meeting.

NOTE: After the Conversation Starters, the first activity I suggest involves making sure everyone can look at their reflection and process for a few minutes. For some of you, having your group use their phones could be an option, however be sensitive if you have young people who don't have phones yet. In the lesson, there is also an Amazon link to purchase small two-inch mirrors at a very affordable price.

Starting Your Meeting

Setting the Tone

Before you dive into the conversation, I recommend starting with something like the following:

NOTE: As you introduce this series to your group, you can do so with the analogy used in the introduction to this lesson and the parent email. Before you start your meeting, take a piece of paper and cut it up into a number of smaller slices of paper and have these ready during the intro.

The question “Who Am I?” is one of the most-asked questions by every human since the beginning of time, and we’re excited to focus in on this question over the next two months or so. However, before we can start to answer that question from the perspective of Jesus, we have to first find out how we are currently answering that question in our own lives. I’d like to give you a picture of where we are going to start this conversation with a quick analogy. [Ask for a volunteer to come and join you up front and hold their hands out in front of them, palms up.]

Explain: *Whether we are aware of it or not, all of us in this room have been answering the question “Who am I?” for quite some time. We all have... [After each word below, give your volunteer a slip of paper and ask them to hold it in their hands.]*

*...experiences
...encounters
...interactions
...failures
...successes
...etc.*

...that help define who we think we are. Eventually, what we find is that our “hands” are full of ideas. Some of those things are positive, but some of them aren’t. And if we want to honestly explore this question in regard to what God says about us, we actually have to understand what we are holding on to already and discern if there is anything we actually need to let go of to make room for what God really says about us. That is what today’s conversation is all about.

After you set the tone, take a moment to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to be present in your conversation, for peace and love to be at the forefront of the discussion, and for God to lead everyone in the room to his truth and no one else’s.

REMEMBER: As you dive into the content, **your job is to facilitate**, not teach the whole time. Do your best to ask a lot of questions and use some of the tips suggested in the Introduction. Also, please remember it’s okay to jump around and not follow the curriculum linearly. Take the time to be extra sensitive and allow conversation to develop. If you need to carry the discussion over more than one week, that’s totally okay.