

Follow THE LAMB



An Early Church VBS

Third Edition
Pamela J. Nielsen

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***For Rebekah, Aaron, and Anna,
that you may continue to follow the Lamb***

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Lamb of God, Ravenna-style sarcophagus, late fifth century, St. Vitale, Ravenna, Italy

The Nativity (Mother and Child) drawn by Adam Bohren and Adam Kinney

The Crosses on Golgotha drawn by Adam Bohren and Adam Kinney

The Empty Tomb drawn by Adam Bohren and Adam Kinney

The Ascension of Christ drawn by Adam Bohren and Adam Kinney

The Preaching on Pentecost drawn by Adam Bohren and Adam Kinney

Baptism of Christ, mosaic in dome of Arian Baptistry, c. 500 Ravenna, Italy.

Preface

From the ascension of Christ through the sixth century was a fascinating time in the history of Christianity. This was an age that began with the severe persecution of the early saints (as told in Acts 6–7) but culminated in the acceptance of God’s Church throughout Asia, Europe, and part of Africa. Ultimately, Christianity became the state religion of the very empire that once tried to crush it.

The Follow the Lamb Vacation Bible School curriculum will take both students and teachers back to a world where Christianity was just beginning. How did these early Christians worship their God and live their lives? What did they believe? How did they teach and proclaim their belief so that thousands were added to the faith? Can the early Christians offer any lessons for our modern times? What kind of legacy have they left us? Follow the Lamb explores these questions by recreating for your students the days and nights of the Early Church.

While this curriculum is designed for use in a five-day VBS setting, it is versatile enough to be used anytime of the day that fits your program. Offering an evening program affords the opportunity to have adult classes. Serving a simple meal before the sessions would be in keeping with what the first Christians did as they gathered. This was called the *agape*, or love, meal. Feel free to adapt these lessons to whatever works best in your setting.

The Early Church era is not usually a well-known topic to the average

VBS teacher. Therefore, it is important for all teachers and helpers to become as familiar as they can with the subject before the week of VBS. Ask the pastor, or someone who has taken the time to read up on the subject, to teach them. The success of any teaching experience relies on adequate preparation—know your subject and get comfortable talking about it! (Least effective is the approach that leaves preparation up to the individual teacher.) The essay *Biblical Foundations of Worship and the Worship of the First Christians* (pp. 14ff.) provides a brief background to get you started.

Part of what makes any VBS stimulating for the participants are the “extras” that help to create the mood and excitement. These foster an eager attitude toward the entire experience. It is crucial to the success of this curriculum that your committee take time to set the stage and create the drama of the early years of Christianity. The section entitled *Setting the Stage* (p. 11) provides specific ways and ideas for you to bring these ancient days—and your students—to life.

The teacher guides and the student activity sheets of Follow the Lamb are divided into four levels. The lessons are those that the early Christians imparted to newcomers who were preparing for Baptism. After three years of instruction, the *catechumens* (learners) were ready for Baptism. Follow the Lamb provides a taste of what these learners feasted on during those three years. Look for the lessons beginning on page 71.

The Early Church left a legacy of hymn texts and liturgy sung throughout Christendom even today. This curriculum includes a sampling of Early Church psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that the Church still regularly uses. Included are instructions for teaching the hymns, liturgy, and musical activities. By learning these, the children will be able to join in the church's worship life. Look for the music in *Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (p. 23).

As with music, early Christian art has much to teach and offer us. Follow the Lamb's suggested crafts offer a close re-creation of the craft work of the Early Church era. Keeping in mind economics and the desire for lasting value, the projects are feasible for the various ages of artisans in your VBS. See the *Arts and Crafts* section (p. 51).

Earlier, I suggested the possibility of a meal before an evening session. Since early Christians had no church buildings, they gathered in someone's home—first worshiping and then eating together. Does your church have a group that would enjoy preparing a simple meal each evening? The section *Food and Fellowship* (p. 13) offers ideas for meals and snacks that are fitting to the theme.

Worship was the center of life in the Early Church; accordingly, there is a strong emphasis on worship in this curriculum. In an era when Scripture was hand-copied and extremely expensive, individual churches generally did not own a Bible. Daily openings offer a re-creation, though a scaled-down model, of what took place in the house churches of the early Christians. The daily worship services begin on page 36. While no closing service is included in this cur-

riculum, a modified Easter service would be a fantastic culminating activity. The lessons, the music instruction, and the crafts (especially the *Banner-Making* craft, p. 61) all point to the empty tomb and the Lamb of God.

Sending a daily newsletter home with the children is a great way to expand the reach of your VBS, spreading God's Word into your students' homes. Included in the *Spread the Word!* section (p. 64) are suggestions and copy-ready newsletter pages for your use, along with publicity ideas.

It is my prayer that this week of stepping back into the history of the Early Christian Church will give you a fresh perspective on where we've come from, underscoring what is truly important! Start early, pray often, and stay in the Word as you begin and carry out this important task!

Deaconess Pam Nielsen
January 2004

To the VBS Director

Follow the Lamb is different. It departs greatly from the usual VBS program marketed by many Christian publishing houses. Underlying this entire curriculum is the philosophy that Vacation Bible School should reinforce and uphold the central work of the church. That work is to impart the gifts of God (Word and Sacrament) to the world. To that end, the worship, music, and lessons provided are not that new or different from what goes on during the Divine Worship on Sunday mornings. Rather, they explain and complement the Divine Worship of the church.

VBS has always been a tool of the church to bring in new, unchurched children, and by extension, their parents. It should not only get them in the church door, but also acquaint and familiarize the newcomer with what your church is truly all about. How confusing it must be to a child to participate in a week of worship and teaching that is far different from what takes place on Sunday during the Divine Service. How beneficial it would be for the new child to be able to bring his or her parents to church on Sunday, helping them sing the liturgy and hymns that he or she learned in VBS.

Follow the Lamb also offers something for your regular flock. It teaches the children of your parish about the roots of their faith and connects them to the first Christians. They will begin to understand that they are part of something much larger than First Lutheran on the corner of Third and Main Streets. The faith and lives of the first Christians will leave a lasting impression on your students.

This curriculum offers many opportunities for the participants to learn in an environment that is both exciting and enjoyable. The end goal, however, is for each child to learn something significant about the life of Christ and what it means for them in eternity. Such an understanding will guide you as you consider your plans for carrying out this program. As the writer notes, "There is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This thought applies to VBS as well. Build in active, playful times. The crafts, snack, and recreational parts provide for such. But keep the worship, lessons, and music for times of learning and reverence for the Lamb. In this way, you will impart another lesson to the children. Namely, when one deals with the things of God, one should not be casual. When one encounters the holy and divine, one stands in reverence and awe.

The adage, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well" is one last piece of advice to consider to ensure the success of this VBS. Believe in it, assemble a like-minded staff, and give it your all! The Lord will bless your efforts as you serve Him.

Preparing to Follow the Lamb

Part of any successful venture is proper preparation. It is imperative that the entire VBS staff assemble at least once—preferably several times—prior to the week of your VBS. Follow the Lamb is a unique VBS program in that it teaches more than basic Bible stories. The teachers and staff will be learning about the Early Church—perhaps for the first time. Your program will be most successful if the entire staff understands the theme and atmosphere that you are trying to create. From the opening worship through snack time, there is an opportunity each day to teach the children about life in the Early Church. Encourage your music, art, and classroom teachers to explain how what they are teaching was part of the Early Church era.

There is a great opportunity for your parish pastor to take a prominent role in the daily worship. This will help the children understand more about your Sunday morning services. The pastor should also take the lead in preparing the teaching staff for the daily lessons with background information on life during the Early Church period. *Biblical Foundations of Worship and the Worship of the First Christians* (pp. 14ff.) presents an overview of the Early Church era. Make copies for your entire staff.

The music selections are from *Lutheran Worship and Hymnal Supplement 98* and reinforce the daily lessons. They will require a bit more effort than the usual children's Bible songs, but if the entire staff takes the time to learn them, they can sing and

teach them with confidence.

The craft projects are also designed to teach your students something about the Early Church era. Your craft leaders will want to meet ahead of time to practice making the various projects. The more familiar they are with the materials and the process, the better the projects will turn out for the children.

The publicity group should meet early (at least two months ahead) and target the papers, storefronts, and neighborhoods where you want to spread the word about your VBS program. Suggestions for publicity are on page 64.

Often your local Christian bookstore has generic registration forms available for purchase. (Another option is to ask someone to create a registration form and make copies.) In any case, the registration form should include not only name, age, and grade, but also address, phone number, parent's name, and who to call in case of an emergency. A place to indicate home church is helpful as well. Information on unchurched children should be shared with your congregation's evangelism board.

Any VBS is a major undertaking. Start early and assemble a staff. Many hands make for light work, as they say, so spread the tasks around! Do it well and enjoy it!

Follow the Lamb

Lesson Themes by Day

Day 1: Advent to Christmas

The Account of Christ's Birth
Central focus: *The Incarnation*

Day 2: The Passion of Christ

The Story of Christ's Suffering and Death
Central focus: *Sharing Christ's Suffering through Our Baptism*

Day 3: The Resurrection of Christ

Our Lord's Resurrection on Easter
Central focus: *How Baptism and the Lord's Supper
Connect Us to Christ's Resurrection*

Day 4: Ascension

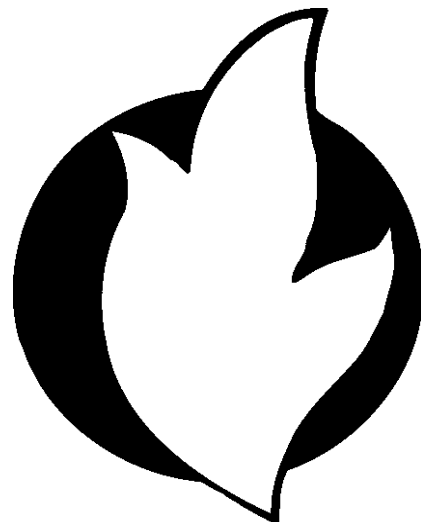
Christ's Ascension to Heaven
Central focus: *The Second Coming of Christ and What It Means for Us*

Day 5: Pentecost

The Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
Central focus: *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*

Suggested daily time blocks are as follows:

Opening:	20 minutes
Lesson:	30 minutes
Music:	20 minutes
Crafts:	30 minutes
Eat/Play:	20 minutes



Setting the Stage

A fantastic way to emphasize the idea of the Early Church era is to use props and costumes to re-create the environment of the time period. You may wish to consider having your teachers and VBS staff wear a Roman style of dress over their summer clothes. (The Roman look can be achieved by draping an ordinary bedsheet around the body and over one shoulder. Then tie a rope around the waist. Leather sandals add to the look.) If you are really ambitious, the children could wear similar outfits. (This will require you to have fabric on hand as they arrive each day. Think bedsheets cut to size or large bath towels. For smaller students, a simple tunic can be made out of a large pillowcase with holes cut out of the sewn end for arms and head. Use rope for the belts.)

As you select your classrooms, consider locating the classes in unusual places such as the church balcony, underneath a staircase, in a courtyard, and so forth. Children love things that are out of the ordinary. Another fun idea is to have each class meet in a different location each day. This is best accomplished by keeping the needed supplies (crayons, paper, pencils, etc.) in a large basket in each room. Teachers can then carry a smaller basket with their lesson materials in it.

You may want to create a second-century city with house churches, bake shops, craft shops, and music shops. To create your buildings, first draw and then paint the exteriors of various shops onto large sections of butcher paper. Include doors, win-

dows, and assorted shop signs. Then wrap the paper around folding tables. Another option is to paint your buildings onto large pieces of cardboard cut from appliance boxes. (Ask for them at your local appliance store.) Set up your mock town in your assembly room, gym, or outdoor grassy area. Add props to the shops to make them more lifelike. Building your city would be a good youth group project! Have them check the local library or the Internet for ideas on how the buildings should look.

If you have class outside, you may wish to have simple canvas canopies set up for each class to shield them from the sun. Having sunscreen on hand is also a good idea. The children can sit on carpet squares.

The classrooms, or "house churches," should be marked with the fish symbol. In the early days of persecution, a fish drawn on the side of a building indicated to the first Christians that a house of worship was within. The Roman soldiers were clueless as to its meaning. The Greek word *ICHTHUS*, or "fish," is an acronym for the Greek words *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*. The fish symbol continues to this day as a symbol of Christianity.

In the classrooms themselves, a little decorating will add to the Early Church atmosphere. There is no need for chairs and desks. Carpet squares, woven rugs, or straw mats would be most appropriate for the time period. Clay pots, baskets, and plants decoratively placed are a nice touch. Remember, these were people's homes.

A great weeklong decorating craft is a Bible story mural. Obtain a few large sheets of drywall from a building supply store. (Large sections of cardboard appliance boxes will also work.) Put the drywall up, and let the children work on a Bible story mural during the week. Explain to them that this is what the first Christians did to the plaster walls of the houses in which they worshiped.

Character roles: Select some volunteers to dress as Roman soldiers, pot makers, deacons/deaconesses, shopkeepers, and so on. They can visit the classes and share their identity. The characters should also ask the students what they are doing. Teachers should be prepared for the visits and should be ready to guide the children in answering. They should be encouraged to bear witness of their faith. (The snack and craft leaders should play the parts of the town baker and local craftsmen.)

Other ideas to set the stage: Some churches have held their classes in dark rooms and used only candlelight during the lesson time. Another church collected claylike bowls and cups on which to serve each day's snacks. These were obtained from garage sales and thrift shops. Another set up a mock city by using tents in the churchyard. These were arranged in a circle or square with the craft and music area in the center of the "city." The craft area was set up to look like a market. Some churches have even given the children little pouches with stones in them. With their stone "money," the students purchase food (the snack), crafts (the supplies for the day's craft), and other items in the market.

Food and Fellowship

In His ministry, Jesus placed great value in gathering around the table. If you study the Book of Luke, over and over again you will see references to Jesus eating with someone. His teaching was often done as He ate with His followers. The Early Church, so intent on living as a community, regularly gathered together for food and fellowship. In fact, following the evening worship services, they shared a meal called the agape feast (*agape* means “love”). Everyone brought what they could. These were the first potlucks. The Book of Acts offers us many glimpses of this practice, as do the writings of St. Paul.

If you have chosen an evening VBS program, in order to entice adults to join in the week of learning, consider offering a light supper each evening. To be “authentic,” serve fresh fruits and vegetables, pita bread with various fillings, and fruit juices. Lamb was a popular meat in the Mediterranean world of the Early Church. Consider serving roast lamb one night. If you offer a meal, you need not have a snack time.

For the children’s snack, quarters of pita bread with various fillings are a great old-world option. Fresh fruit (apples, bananas, grapes, and raisins) is a good snack. Add some fish-shaped crackers to explain how the first Christians used the fish as a secret symbol to tell other Christians where the house churches were. And fruit juices are always tasty. Of course, children always enjoy the old standby—cookies and fruit punch!

Consider having the snacks outside, or decorate your snack area to fit the period and let the children sit on the floor. The snack area could also be a “baker’s tent” in the market. Do what works best in your situation.

The Biblical Foundations of Worship and the Worship of the First Christians

The worship of early Christians did not come from an instructional manual that miraculously came down from heaven at Pentecost. Christian worship developed from Jewish worship and the ministry of Jesus. It came about after a long and slow process of recognizing how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had changed worship forever. The New Testament gives us both the forms of worship and the theology behind those forms. Ultimately, however, Christian worship is about Christ, and it developed from whatever was available to early Christians that helped them highlight Christ's presence among them to offer His gifts of life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins. And so early Christians used the Old Testament, the worship they knew as Jews, Jesus' ministry of table fellowship with sinners, the New Testament, and the wisdom of the apostles to create many of the worship forms we use today. The following material offers a glimpse at the influences on early Christians that assisted them in their worship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jewish Precedents for Christian Worship

Jesus was an orthodox Jew who worshiped where Jews worshiped and participated fully in Jewish rites, as did His disciples and His other followers. Christian liturgy grew out of Jewish worship rites. For New Testament Christians, understanding why we

worship as we do requires that we rediscover how Jesus and the disciples worshiped. There are a number of important aspects of their liturgical life that influenced Christian worship.

The Passover

Passover is the supreme celebration of atonement in the life of the Jews. The lamb's blood was sprinkled over the doors of their homes so that the angel of death would pass over them. The Jews celebrated Passover every year as the most significant redemptive event in their lives. It focused on the coming Messiah and reminded them of all God's past blessings. In the last Passover Jesus celebrated with His disciples, He changed the Jewish Passover into the first Christian liturgy, called the Last Supper. We might call this last Passover "Jesus' Passover," since He showed how it pointed to Him and came to fulfillment on this night He was betrayed. The Christian liturgy of the Sacrament of Holy Communion is based on "Jesus' Passover" with His disciples in the upper room.

The Three Places of Worship: Temple, Synagogue, House

There were three places for the Jews to worship. The most important place was the temple in Jerusalem. The other two places were the synagogue, like our churches today, and the home, where special table prayers

and readings attended the festive meals of the Jews.

Temple

The temple was the place of sacrifice where God dwelt in the Holy of Holies, the one-time home of the Ark of the Covenant, the jars of manna, and the Ten Commandments. The temple was very earthy and real. As a place of sacrifice, it was filled with the smells and sights that would accompany such sacrifices. This would seem offensive to us today, resembling a slaughter house more than a holy place, but this reality signaled the presence of God in this space as the temple sacrifices pointed forward to Christ.

Synagogue

Synagogues developed during the period of Jewish history when the Jews were scattered throughout the inhabited world. Since they could not make a yearly pilgrimage to the temple for Passover, they developed places of worship where they would gather on the Sabbath. The liturgy of the synagogue was exactly the opposite of the temple liturgy, since there were no sacrifices in them. Synagogue worship centered around the reading and interpretation of the Word, use of the Shema, or Old Testament “creed,” from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one”), and the Psalms (which were the Old Testament hymns that accompanied the themes of the Word. The Sanctus from Isaiah 6 and Psalm 118 was one of the earliest hymns.). These services were very similar to our Matins, Vespers, and Morning and Evening Prayer and also helped shape the word structure in

the service of Holy Communion.

House

The house worship began on Friday night after sundown, the beginning of the Sabbath for the Jews. Every Friday night, they would have a meal and a very brief but structured liturgy based on the Passover liturgy. It was called the Sabbath evening meal seder (*seder* means “order,” and here, “order of service”). This meal reminded them every Friday night of the Passover, that is, the Lamb who would be slain. This *Lamb* was the promised Messiah, the Christ. On Saturday morning, they went to the synagogue for worship. This house liturgy also had an influence on the Christian liturgy of the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus participated in all three Jewish places of worship and in the liturgies they used. He cleansed the temple to make it a worthy place for His teaching (Luke 19:45–46), and prophesied that He would replace it with Himself (John 2:19–22). He often went into the synagogues to teach (Luke 4:16–30). Most of the occasions in the Gospel when Jesus goes into people’s homes are related to the Sabbath and the Friday evening meal (e.g., Levi the tax collector in Luke 5; Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7; Zacchaeus the chief tax collector in Luke 19).

The Table Fellowship of Jesus

The table fellowship of Jesus with sinners forms the basis for early Christian worship. For when Christians today gather together to hear God’s Word and receive the Sacrament, they