

# Seeing Jesus in John's Gospel

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i> .....	3
To the Leader .....	4
Session 1. Tabernacle .....	5
Session 2. Giver of Living Water .....	9
Session 3. Bread of Life .....	13
Session 4. Good Shepherd .....	17
Session 5. Resurrection and Life.....	21
Session 6. Passover Offering .....	25

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Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

## **Meet the Writer**

**Boyd Lien** an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. In addition to serving in Augusta, he has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; and Richmond, Virginia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, The Logos Ministry, and the Kerygma program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently he has authored the revised Resource Book and Leader's Guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.



## Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.



## To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

# Tabernacle

## Scripture

Various verses from John; Exodus 26:15–25; 33:7–11; and 40:29–38

## Main Idea

John describes the indescribable through metaphors. The wilderness tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple were once the dwelling places of God's glory. Now, John sees in Jesus the new glory-filled dwelling of God. Jesus is God become flesh! God's glory is seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

## Teaching Points

This session invites participants to consider:

1. The ways John uses metaphors throughout his Gospel to proclaim the meaning and identity of Jesus Christ.
2. The importance and meaning of the tabernacle, God's sanctuary, in the faith of Israel.
3. How John's metaphor links the presence of God's glory in the tabernacle with the presence of God's glory in Jesus Christ.
4. Identifying where God's presence is visible in our lives today.

## Resources Needed

Multiple translations of the Bibles or prepared handouts

Participant's books

Christ-candle (usually a white pillar candle) and matches

Slips of paper

Pens

## **Leader Prep**

Prepare for leading each session in the course by reading the participant's book, underlining its primary points, highlighting questions to pursue, and noting significant insights. The format of each session is intended to guide participants in first seeing Jesus through the eyes of John and the faith of Israel before seeing Jesus through their own eyes.

In introducing the course you may want to use the words of Dr. McKim in the introduction of the participant's book. He writes: "The Gospel of John presents many portraits of Jesus including many that employ metaphors. This study introduces us to the fantastically rich ways John's Gospel sees Jesus."

Since this study focuses on images that John uses in proclaiming the identity of Jesus, many of the activities will also depend on visual images, those already created and those the group will create themselves.

For Heart, you will either need to have Bibles of different translations (such as the New Revised Standard Version, New International Version, King James Version, Today's English Version, Jerusalem Bible, and The Message) or you will need to create a handout that lists different translations of John 1:14. Different translations of this verse can be cut and pasted from an online Bible website. You may want to display illustrations of what the tabernacle and the temple may have looked like. Check out books in your church library or search the Internet for images to print.

In Depart, you will need a slip of paper with a passage from the book of John for each person in your group. Scripture passages could include: John 1:43–46; 3:22–24; 4:46–50; 6:10–11; 6:16–20; 7:13–18; 8:8–11; 8:12–15; 9:5–7; 10:10–12; 11:35–37; 13:3–5; 14:25–27; 15:12–17; 17:1–3; 19:16–19; 20:16–18; 20:26–28; and 21:15–17. (If you have a large group, Scripture passages can be used on multiple slips of paper.)

## **Leading the Session**

### **Gather**

- Light the Christ-candle, sharing this metaphor from John: "Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'" (John 8:12).

- Pray together the prayer in the participant's book.
- Briefly introduce the scope of this course by previewing the six sessions listed on the contents page in the participant's book.

## Head

- Dr. Hylen writes: "Though modern Christians will automatically identify the Word with Jesus, it can be instructive to read John 1:1–3a and to imagine we do not know that John will connect the Word with Jesus. Pausing for a moment in this way can give content to the metaphor of Jesus as the Word. Instead of assuming that Jesus defines what it means to be God's Word, we remember that ancient Christians, seeking to give voice to their experience of Christ, drew on existing concepts to describe whom they understood Christ to be."
- Challenge the participants to imagine not knowing John's connection of the Word with Jesus. Read John 1:1–3a. Ask: *How does thinking in this way enhance your understanding of Jesus?*
- Ask: *What is the definition of a metaphor?* Explain that its root is from the Greek word for "to transfer." Share or elicit some favorite contemporary metaphors.
- John used metaphors to give voice to *his* experience of Christ. Invite volunteers to read aloud the following verses from John's Gospel: John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11–14; 11:25; 14:6; and 15:1, 5. Encourage the participants to visualize each metaphor as the passages are read. Ask: *What metaphors help give voice to your understanding of Christ?*

## Heart

- Seeing Jesus through the eyes of John requires that we first consider the meaning of *tabernacle* in the faith of Israel.
- Form three groups. Assign each group one of the following readings: Exodus 26:15–25; 33:7–11; and 40:29–38. Direct each group to read their assigned passage and discuss the following questions: *What is the purpose of the tabernacle? What are some features of the tabernacle? What takes place in the tabernacle? How is the glory of God depicted?* Give each group an opportunity to report the highlights of their conversation to the rest of the participants.

- Read John 1:10–14.
- Dr. Hylen writes: “John’s tabernacle metaphor may seem muted for modern readers. . . . John identifies Jesus as the tabernacle. As God dwelt among the Israelites in the wilderness, so also God’s Word dwells in human flesh in the person of Jesus.”
- Distribute Bibles of different translations or handouts with the various translations of John 1:14. Point out the ways in which the original Greek words have been translated differently in this verse.
- Ask: *What do you see in this metaphor? What meaning does this have for you? What new understanding of Jesus has this metaphor provided?*

## Hands

- Read John 1:18. Dr. Hylen writes: “God’s presence still resides in a tent, only this time it is a tent of human flesh. This is the place where God’s glory becomes visible. John points out numerous instances in which God’s glory became visible in the life of Jesus.”
- Ask: *Where is God’s presence in Jesus visible today? What is God currently doing through Jesus?*
- Ask: *As a disciple of Jesus Christ, what are specific ways in which you can be Christ’s presence in the world?*

## Depart

- Distribute the prepared slips of paper and pens. Provide these directions: Read the passage on the slip of paper. Write a short action statement that begins, “Jesus . . .” followed by an action verb that expresses an aspect of Jesus’ identity and ministry that connects with the Scripture passage. For instance, “Jesus heals.”
- Join together in prayer. Give participants an opportunity to read their phrase. After each phrase is read, lead the group in responding, “We have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.”
- Extinguish the Christ-candle.



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Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i> .....	3
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Session 1. Tabernacle .....	5
Session 2. Giver of Living Water .....	11
Session 3. Bread of Life .....	17
Session 4. Good Shepherd .....	23
Session 5. Resurrection and Life .....	30
Session 6. Passover Offering .....	37
Suggestions for Further Study .....	44

# Tabernacle

## Scripture

**John 1:1–18** The opening passage of John’s Gospel introduces Jesus and sets the stage for the stories that follow. In verse 14, John uses the metaphor of Jesus as tabernacle to communicate the incarnation of God’s Word in the person of Jesus. The notion of God’s presence “tabernacling” in human flesh is an undercurrent found in other parts of the Gospel.

## Prayer

Gracious and everlasting God, you pitched your tent among the Israelites in the wilderness, leading them in the way of life. So also you sent your Word to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. We give you thanks, O God. You have provided for our needs and given us more than we could ever deserve. We thank you. We see your glory in Jesus Christ, whose gifts of grace heal us and restore us to life. May Jesus Christ be real to us today and always. Therefore we praise you, blessed and holy trinity, one God forever and ever. Amen.

## Introduction

In verse 1, John introduced the Word of God. Though modern Christians will automatically identify the Word with Jesus, it can be instructive to read John 1:1–3a and to imagine we do not know that John will connect the Word with Jesus. Pausing for a moment in this way can give content to the metaphor of Jesus as the Word. Instead of assuming that Jesus defines what it means to be God’s Word, we remember that ancient Christians, seeking to give voice to their experience of Christ, drew on existing concepts to describe whom they understood Christ to be.

God’s Word is a creative force. John begins with the same words that begin the book of Genesis, “In the beginning . . .” The reader is transported to that time before human existence, when God spoke, and the world came into being (see Genesis 1). Other Old Testament writers also spoke of creation with reference to God’s word: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the

breath of the LORD's mouth" (Psalm 33:6). John uses similar imagery to focus the reader's attention on the creative power of divine speech.

In the first century, God's Word also served an important theological purpose. Many philosophers, pagan and Jewish, were concerned to describe God's interaction with the world in a way that preserved God's holiness. God is invisible, inaccessible to mere mortals. God's "word" (Greek, *logos*) was the principle of reason through which the ineffable God communicated with creation. Jews also understood this *logos* to be the word of Scripture. The abstract concept of the communicating *logos* was embodied in the law, words given by God to guide humans in their pursuit of holiness.

John 1:14 is the climax of John's prologue. It is not until verse 14 that John explicitly associates the Word with Jesus: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." This creative power of God, this means through which finite, mortal creatures can perceive the will of the eternal God, takes up residence as a human person, Jesus. With these words the good news of John's Gospel begins: the saving presence of God inhabits the world.

## **The Dwelling Place of God**

The dense, beautifully crafted first eighteen verses of John say much about John's theological claims. One claim that usually gets little attention: John's identification of Jesus with the tabernacle. John's first readers were Jews, who knew the traditions of Israel and came to believe in Jesus as Messiah. For them, the language of verse 14 would have called to mind God's dwelling place during the wilderness period, the tabernacle. The Greek word for tabernacle is *skēnē*. John uses the related Greek verb, *skēnoō*, "live," to describe the residence of the Word in the flesh.

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is depicted as God's dwelling place among the Israelites during their years in the wilderness. God's instructions to Moses for the building of the tabernacle occupy large portions of the book of Exodus. The tabernacle, or tent of meeting (Hebrew, *mishkān*; Greek *skēnē*), moved from place to place with Israel throughout the wilderness period (Exodus 40:36–38). It was a place where people went seeking a revelation from God (33:7), though only Moses is said to have spoken directly to God there (vv. 8–9). The tabernacle was a place of assembly, sacrifice, and consecration of leaders (see, for example, Leviticus 8; Numbers 11:16–17; 16:18).

After Israel began to inhabit the Promised Land, the tabernacle was first set up at Shiloh (Joshua 18:1) and sacrifices were offered there. The tabernacle later came to be associated with the temple after it was built (1 Chronicles 6:31–32). Though the tabernacle was probably destroyed along with Solomon’s temple in 587 B.C. (Psalm 74:7), the rebuilt temple was identified as God’s dwelling place.

The tabernacle (and later the temple) was the place where God’s “glory” appeared: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). In the Old Testament the “glory of God” indicates the visible manifestation of God’s presence. Humans could not look upon God directly, but could perceive God’s glory. Though the ability to enter into God’s presence is specifically associated with Moses (34:29–35), at times God’s glory appears to all Israel at the tent of meeting (Numbers 14:10b; 16:19, 42). The perception of God’s glory is sometimes associated with God’s acts. For example, Moses and Aaron tell the Israelites regarding the gift of manna, “In the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD” (Exodus 16:7). Thus, God’s glory manifested itself in a number of ways. But the “dwelling place” of God’s glory was the tabernacle.

John’s tabernacle metaphor may seem muted for modern readers. By combining the concepts of the “dwelling” of God with the vision of God’s glory, John sends a cue that early readers of the Gospel would easily understand. John identifies Jesus as the tabernacle. As God dwelt among the Israelites in the wilderness, so also God’s Word dwells in human flesh in the person of Jesus.

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## **The Dwelling Place of God’s Glory**

As the dwelling place of God’s Word, Jesus makes visible the glory of God. Just as God was not directly visible to Moses (Exodus 33:17–23), John also affirms that humans can perceive God’s glory only indirectly, through the place where God dwells: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus is a visible manifestation of the presence of God.

Though the word *tabernacle* and the verb form *skēnoō* do not appear again in the Gospel, John has set the stage to read the rest of

the Gospel through this lens. Throughout the Gospel, the reader will discover that Jesus' signs reveal his glory (2:11; 11:40). God's glory is especially manifest in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension (17:5; cf. 7:39; 12:23; 17:1). John's introduction gives the reader a way to understand these claims. God's glory is visible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus because he is the dwelling place of God.

In John 1 we see the creativity of early Christians seeking to express a new religious experience centered on the person of Jesus. John draws on older ideas that were available in his culture. Jews already conceived of God's Word as being embodied in the law. They also knew stories of God's glory residing in a tent. John brings these ideas together in a creative way to express his understanding of Jesus. The result is something altogether new, a way of giving voice to the meaning and identity of Jesus. John combines these metaphors, Word and tabernacle, to express the complex idea of the incarnation. God's presence still resides in a tent, only this time it is a tent of human flesh. This is the place where God's glory becomes visible.

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*God's presence still resides in a tent, only this time it is a tent of human flesh. This is the place where God's glory becomes visible.*

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John points out numerous instances in which God's glory became visible in the life of Jesus. Yet the perception of God's glory is not limited to those humans who encountered the historical Jesus. In John 1:14 the narrator includes the voice of the believing community testifying to their perception of God's glory: "We have seen his glory." As the dwelling place of God's Word, Jesus continues to manifest God's glory to those who believe.

The continued presence of God was especially important in the period in which John's Gospel was written, for the Jewish people had recently experienced the devastating loss of the temple in Jerusalem. (The temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and John's Gospel was likely composed between A.D. 75 and 85.) The destruction of this temple raised questions for Jews about the dwelling place of God.

## **God Continues to Dwell in Jesus**

In later chapters, John refers to the destruction of the temple. Because he has already identified Jesus as the tabernacle, John can use these passages to reassure readers that God's presence has not disappeared, but continues to dwell among them in Jesus. The first

of these occurs around the cleansing of the temple. John situates this act at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 2:13–22). It is his first public event.

The cleansing of the temple should be understood as a parallel to the sign-acts of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 13; 27:1–7). Jeremiah not only spoke God's word to the people, but also performed symbolic acts that presaged the judgment of Judah. Jesus' act is to drive the merchants and money changers out of the temple. Like Jeremiah, Jesus symbolically enacts the overthrow of the temple.

In response, the Jews ask Jesus for a sign to justify his ability to take such a bold, symbolic action. Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). At the time, neither the Jews nor the disciples understood this cryptic saying. The narrator intervenes: "He was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:21). The sign that justifies Jesus' purging of the temple is his later resurrection.

For the first Christian readers of the Gospel, any reference to the destruction of the temple would also bring to mind its actual destruction by the Roman army. From this perspective, Jesus' act of cleansing is a destructive act that prophesies the overthrow of the temple. At the same time, his words also promise restoration. Though the temple is destroyed, John claims that God's presence is still available to those who perceive God's glory in Jesus. Thus, Jesus' words in 2:19 make sense at the narrative level as a response to the request for a sign, and they have additional significance for the Gospel's reader, who knows the later historical events.

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Jesus does not denigrate the temple in this passage. Christian interpreters have often cast the cleansing of the temple as a harsh critique of its rituals, symbolizing Jesus' rejection of Judaism as a whole. Yet within the logic of John's metaphors, it makes more sense to read this passage as an affirmation of the temple and its importance. The temple is the earthly dwelling place of God. After its destruction, Christians identified Jesus as God's dwelling. The metaphor communicates the theological claim that all the good things associated with the temple are now available to those who

believe in Jesus. Behind this assertion is the understanding that the temple has abiding value.

John explicitly frames the cleansing of the temple as an act of protection or concern for God's house: "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me' " (John 2:17; cf. Psalm 69:9). Clearly, Jesus' action communicates pending judgment of current temple practices. Yet the affirmation that Jesus exhibits zeal for God's house is important to John's message. Jesus does not replace the temple in a way that denies its importance. Instead, John gives the reader who grieves the loss of the temple a means of locating God's glory. The dwelling place of God has not been lost but can be found in the person of Jesus.

## **Spiritual Practice**

Try to imagine why the temple was so important to John and to Israel. Many psalms communicate something of the Hebrews' experience of the power and presence of God in the temple. Read one of the following psalms each day of the coming week. Notice what the psalmist claims about the temple and its importance. Choose from Psalms 5, 11, 24, 27, 48, 61, 63, and 138.

## **Questions for Reflection**

From John's perspective, God's dwelling in Jesus' flesh does not end at Jesus' death. Writing from a later period, the narrator affirms, "We have seen his glory" (John 1:14). John claims that Jesus continues to manifest God's presence. Where is God's presence in Jesus visible today?

As the tabernacle, Jesus is the place where God's Word dwells. God's Word is a creative force and a way God communicates with humankind. Think about the places you identified God's presence in the first question. How do you see God's Word as active in these situations?

In Jesus' lifetime, God's glory is seen in Jesus' acts of healing and provision. Thinking again about your answers to the first question, how do the places you identified manifest God's glory in similar ways?