

# Following Jesus Today: Challenges and Opportunities

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**Writer:** Boyd Lien

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## **Meet the Writer**

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Boyd has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Augusta, Georgia. 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 Program, and the Kerygma Program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently, he is the author of 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!

# Words and Deeds

## Scripture

Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:16–19; Romans 10:13–15

## Main Idea

Followers of Jesus first come to know him by paying close attention to what he does. Then, as they listen to his words, their understanding is both deepened and challenged. People who do not know Jesus pay closer attention to the actions of his followers than they do to their words.

## Teaching Points

The session invites participants to:

1. Examine Jesus' ministry of proclamation and the ways it is expressed in three Gospels.
2. Address challenges facing the church in communicating the good news of Christ through traditional words and concepts.
3. Become aware of the great ends of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the core commitments of the Fellowship of Presbyterians.

## Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Christ candle, matches

Hymnals with the hymn "The Summons (Will You Come and Follow Me)"

Worship bulletins

## Leader Prep

Before teaching, preview the scope of the course by looking through the themes, Scriptures, and activities of the six sessions. To prepare for leading each session you will want to read the participant's book, underlining its major points, highlighting questions to pursue, and noting significant insights. Involve the participants throughout the course by inviting them to share in the readings of the Scriptures, quotations, and prayers.

For Gather, place a Christ candle on a table in the center of your teaching space. Begin each session by lighting the candle, reading Scripture, and uniting in the participant's book prayer. Enlist members of the group to share in the reading and in lighting the Christ candle. For each participant, prepare a slip of paper bearing one of these ten phrases taken from Dickens's quote: *best of times, worst of times, age of wisdom, age of foolishness, epoch of belief, epoch of incredulity, season of light, season of darkness, spring of hope, and winter of despair.*

For Head, three passages related to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom will be read. Decide the Bible translations you will use, how the readings will be shared, and who will read them. You may want to record the responses given to the questions.

For Heart, you will need to create a handout to guide the discussion. Include the following directions:

Discuss the quote by Timothy Keller in the section "Challenges." Discuss the first "What if. . . ." Ask:

- *In what ways is this observation of contemporary New York similar to or different from those made of the earliest mission outposts—Corinth, Colossae, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome?*
- *What was the strategy and power of the apostles' proclamation of the gospel in those settings?*
- *In what ways is this similar to or different from the strategy and power available to today's church?*

Discuss the second "What if. . . ." Ask:

- *What are some of the profoundly different understandings? Where do you hear them voiced and promoted?*

Discuss the third “What if. . . .” Ask:

- *In what ways is this a particular concern for our day or one present from the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel?*

For Hands, you will introduce the great ends of the church found within the *Book of Order* and the core commitments of the Fellowship of Presbyterians. They are listed in the introduction to the participant’s book. Since both serve as the connecting link for all six sessions, you may wish to post them in the room.

For Depart, you may wish to recruit an accompanist for the hymn.

## **Leading the Session**

### **Gather**

- Light the Christ candle, and read Paul’s words in the following passage:  
For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Romans 10:13–15)
- Pray the prayer in the participant’s book (p. 6).
- Introduce the purpose of the course by reading portions of the editor’s introduction to the participant’s book (p. 3).
- Read the opening words of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. Mr. Hylton writes, “Dickens’s words are an apt description of the challenges and opportunities facing the church.” Distribute one of the ten phrases from the quote that you have written on slips of paper to each participant. Invite them to offer a current example that points to the truth of their phrase. For example, ask: *In what ways is it now the best of times?* Repeat the question for each of the ten phrases.

### **Head**

- Read the section of Mr. Hylton’s introduction that begins, “Jesus sends his followers into the world as agents of redemption. We are called to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” Ask the questions Mr. Hylton asks:

*What is proclamation? What are the challenges to gospel proclamation in our post-Christendom context? Why should we, as followers of Jesus, be concerned with proclaiming the good news?*

- Examine the ways Jesus' ministry of proclamation is articulated in the three Synoptic Gospels. Read Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14–15; and Luke 4:16–19. For each reading, ask: *What does Jesus do? In what ways do his actions proclaim the good news of God's kingdom? What does Jesus expect of those who hear his words? In what ways are we to respond?*

## **Heart**

- Mr. Hylton writes, “Words and concepts the church takes for granted, such as *gospel* and *salvation*, are foreign to many people today. The preached gospel seems to resonate only with those whose lives are already formed by the values of church and Scripture. Others hear the message of Jesus and are confused.” Ask: *Do you agree or disagree with Mr. Hylton's observations? How would you define such words and concepts as proclamation, good news, salvation, mission, and post-Christendom?*
- Distribute copies of a worship bulletin. Encourage the participants to read the documents through the eyes of someone new to faith in Jesus. Ask: *How effective are these words in communicating the good news of Christ? Where may some people be confused? What are some alternate ways of expressing the message of God's love in Jesus? How are we called to cooperate with God's desire for hearts to resonate with Jesus' words and actions?*
- Form small groups to discuss the quote by Tim Keller in the section “Challenges” (participant's book, p. 8). Provide prepared handouts (see Leader Prep).
- Regroup, and expand on Mr. Hylton's affirmation that “the good news is living and vibrant.” Ask: *In what ways are you also able to affirm this?*



## Hands

- Mr. Hylton writes, “Twenty-first-century people will remain distant and skeptical if our proclamation is based on religious words that have no meaning to their world. When the church weds proclamation with compassion, or good *words* with good *works*, we create a compelling apologetic for others to hear and believe in the way of Jesus.”
- Read the six great ends of the church (participant’s book, p. 4). Ask: *What good works correspond to each of these good words?*
- Read the nine core commitments identified by the Fellowship of Presbyterians (participant’s book, pp. 4–5). Ask: *What good works correspond to each of these good words?*

## Depart

- Conclude with Mr. Hylton words: “The content of Jesus’ proclamation is clear: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ (Mark 1:15). Urgency radiates throughout the proclamation of good news. Those who hear Jesus’ message are invited to repent (change their minds and hearts) and believe (invest their faith and trust) in response. When we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, we express—in our words and deeds—a specific message Scripture describes as good news.”
- Sing or read together the hymn “The Summons (Will You Come and Follow Me).”
- Join in a prayer expressing gratitude, joys, and concerns.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.

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# Words and Deeds

Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” Followers of Jesus believe God’s Word shapes our priorities. The Bible directs our actions to be in concert with God’s very best for us and for our world. In this session, Ray Hylton, pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Evanston, Illinois, examines the role of proclamation as he preaches each week to a diverse congregation adjoining one of the world’s great academic institutions.

*Paul Detterman*

## Scripture

**Mark 1:14–15** The scope of Jesus’ mission and the content of his message are to repent and believe.

**Romans 10:14–15** Paul desires people to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord through those who hear and gladly proclaim good news to all.

## Prayer

Loving God, when you said, “Let there be light,” creation dawned. Shine that light into our hearts, that we may receive your good news and know that it is good. You have called us out of spiritual darkness and made us a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation—your own people. You have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Help us face the darkness in the world with confidence through your Holy Spirit, and nurture us to become proclaimers of your Word in all we say and do. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

## Introduction

The great British author Charles Dickens wrote the most recognizable opening lines in all of English literature. In his classic *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens imagined the years leading up to the French Revolution: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was

the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Dickens's words are an apt description of the challenges and opportunities facing the church. It is the best of times to form a unique community, different from the surrounding culture, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Few church people would question the character of the church's mission: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? . . . You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:13–16).

However, it is the worst of times for those who want to maintain the patterns, practices, mind-set, and misconceptions of the institutional church. The institution we know as "church" is changing—some would say dying—rapidly. Our commission by Jesus to be salt and light has never been more urgent.

Jesus sends his followers into the world as agents of redemption. We are called to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind. This call leads to questions: What is proclamation? What are the challenges to gospel proclamation in our post-Christendom context? Why should we, as followers of Jesus, be concerned with proclaiming the good news?

## **What Is Proclamation?**

Proclamation begins with Jesus Christ. The Gospels present a robust picture of Jesus engaged in the ministry of proclamation:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. (Mark 1:14)

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Books, Inc., 1868), 1. Found at Questia, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning, [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com)

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:16–19)

Even in John’s account of Jesus’ life, proclamation is at the heart of his work. The woman at the well did not know she was talking to Jesus, but she knew one thing: “The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us’” (John 4:25).

The content of Jesus’ proclamation is clear: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Urgency radiates throughout the proclamation of good news. Those who hear Jesus’ message are invited to repent (change their minds and hearts) and believe (invest their faith and trust) in response. When we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, we express—in our words and deeds—a specific message Scripture describes as good news.

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## Challenges

For some, the word *proclamation* conjures up images of spellbinding or silver-tongued preachers, or it evokes a Billy Graham-type figure whose very name can fill a stadium. Proclamation means *preaching*, most often by those trained in seminary or by extroverts with a rich vocabulary.

In our post-Christendom culture, verbal proclamation of the good news alone is rarely compelling. Christendom—the age in which the church, its teachings, its stories, and its moral assumptions were accepted as the norms of society—is past and gone. Now, in a post-Christendom culture, the church exists at the margins. Words and concepts the church takes for granted, such as *gospel* and *salvation*, are foreign to many people today. The preached gospel seems to resonate only with those whose lives are already formed by the

values of church and Scripture. Others hear the message of Jesus and are confused.

Take these two snapshots of post-Christendom—a culture in which the Christian story is unknown and churches are alien institutions whose rhythms do not impinge on most members of society:

- In a London school, a teenager with no church connections hears the Christmas story for the first time. His teacher tells it well, and the student is fascinated by this amazing story. Risking his friends' mockery, he thanks her for the story. But one thing had disturbed him, so he asks, "Why did they give the baby a swear word for his name?"
- One Sunday in Oxford a man visits a church building to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project the church runs. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving and, recognizing the minister, asks, "What are all these people doing here? I didn't know churches were open on Sundays."

Just a few years ago, neither story would have seemed credible. Today, however, they are but two among countless stories that point to the era of Christendom's fading in Western culture.<sup>2</sup>

Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor whose mission is to reach professionals in New York City with the good news, identifies some of the challenges to proclamation in a post-Christendom or post-Christian culture:

What if the growing majority of people outside the church live by such a radically different view of life that much of what is now said and done by the Christian community is inexplicable or even deeply offensive to them? What if many listeners hold a profoundly different understanding of the concepts of God, truth, right and wrong, freedom, virtue, and sin? What if their approaches to reality, human nature and destiny, and human community are wholly different from our own?<sup>3</sup>

2. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2004), 1–2.

3. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 264.

Yet it is still the best of times: Many people in our post-Christendom culture, while rejecting the church, are fascinated by the way of Jesus when they encounter it lived well. Christendom is gone, but the good news is living and vibrant. God's call to proclaim the good news is much richer, much deeper, and much wider than most of us imagine. All disciples of Jesus are invited to live the good news in their families, their vocations, and their networks of relationships.<sup>4</sup>

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## Why Is Proclamation Important?

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God restored our broken relationships with God and with one another. Now it is our turn to reach out to a broken world. Theologian David Bosch challenges the way North American congregations understand mission. Bosch explains that the *missio Dei* (God's mission in the world) is grounded in the relationship of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God's mission is “derived from the very nature of God.” God the Father sent the Son into the world to save the world. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit as a sustaining Presence. Now, says Bosch, the Holy Spirit is sending the church. The church does not have a mission; it exists to be a mission.<sup>5</sup>

In *Missional Church*, Darrell Guder reasons that if God's mission is to restore and heal creation, then “salvation” means bringing God's healing and restoration to communities and organizations. Guder writes, “For a bank, it might mean granting loans in formerly redlined neighborhoods; for a public school, it might mean instituting peer mediation training among students.”<sup>6</sup> All this is proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

As we see in the accounts of Jesus' life, embodying the good news is not just a matter of sharing good words; it also involves the messy work of transforming the conditions that dehumanize and restrict people who are made in the image of God. Twenty-first-century

4. See [anabaptistnetwork.com/endofchristendom](http://anabaptistnetwork.com/endofchristendom) for additional details about post-Christendom and the gospel.

5. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 389–90.

6. Darrel Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 136.

people will remain distant and skeptical if our proclamation is based on religious words that have no meaning to their world. When the church weds proclamation with compassion, or good words with good works, we create a compelling apologetic for others to hear and believe in the way of Jesus. Are you looking for ways to proclaim the good news in your particular culture? Consider ideas like these:

- Discover and share the many places in Scripture that illustrate God wants not only to save souls but also to heal the whole creation.
- Consider different ways you can earn the right to be heard among people outside your church through your willingness to serve them sacrificially. Create receptivity to the gospel by embodying love, compassion, and Christ-shaped community.
- Form a small group with others in your congregation where you practice demonstrating your faith in your vocational, recreational, and family life. Bring the good news of Jesus Christ into many different parts of your local culture.

If the institution of the church is just a social agency with a unique story, proclamation of that story is secondary to the major work of the church—helping people. If, on the other hand, followers of Jesus proclaim the good news in words (story) *and* deeds (serving people), proclamation becomes crucial to the church’s identity. It gives answer to the inevitable questions “Why are you helping us? Why do you care?”

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## **Spiritual Practice**

Followers of Jesus who desire to deepen their love for their community might consider a prayer walk. Walk through the different neighborhoods of your city, and pray for individuals, homes, schools, businesses, people who are homeless, and neighboring universities and other institutions. Prayer walks help us *see* our community in new ways that we can miss when we are focused on driving in a car. Record what you see and hear. Assess specific opportunities to proclaim the good news.

## **Questions for Reflection**

What are some of the reasons you can think of for the great divide that exists between the believing church and a skeptical world?

How does proclamation informed by the practices of Jesus bring healing to such a divide?

What is your congregation doing to proclaim the good news in both word and deed? What more can they do?