



# **New Members**

## **Workbook: Call to Discipleship**

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Published especially for use in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 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.

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# Introduction

## Welcome to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We are glad to offer this workbook as a resource to introduce the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It provides reflections on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to express that discipleship as a member of the PC(USA).

We all have our different journeys. We come to Christian faith through many experiences, through the zigs and zags of life. Common to us, though, is our love for Jesus Christ. We desire to serve God in this world by being a follower of Jesus.

As we consider what our discipleship means and the directions into which we are being led, we may find ourselves interested in a local church, perhaps a congregation that is part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Presbyterian Christians have a history that stretches back to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and what became known as the Reformed theological tradition. The tradition is alive and vital today and is embodied in the disciples who are called together into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

If you are exploring your Christian discipleship or if you are considering becoming a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this workbook will help orient you to different dimensions of discipleship in the PC(USA).

The main part of this workbook includes considerations that come from a section called “The Ministry of Members” in the Form of Government of the PC(USA). Here is a list of ways members in the church can express their discipleship in forms of ministry. Each chapter of this workbook invites you to reflect on different elements of ministry that church members can carry out. Involvement in the church’s life is wide-ranging.

The “Ministry of Members” section begins this way:

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ’s mission. A faithful member bears witness to God’s love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ’s Church. (*Book of Order*, G-1.0304)

Love for Christ and our discipleship lead us to participate in ministries of the church, the “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Then follows forms of ministry for church members. We can be involved in each of the following ways:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,

- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership, and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful. (*Book of Order*, G-1.0304)

The chapters of this workbook provide opportunities to consider these dimensions of discipleship. They help us gain a sense of direction for involvement through which we can live out our commitments to Jesus Christ in the church.

This resource may be used in different ways: as a self-guided study, as a group study, and as a ready reference for personal reflection. For a self-guided study, simply start at the beginning, reading the articles and completing the activities at your own pace, perhaps meeting regularly with a friend or two. For a group study, suggested lesson plans are offered under “Sessions for Group Study” (see p. 77).

In addition, you will need a Bible, access to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s constitution (*Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*), and a pen or pencil.

May God bless you in your life of faith and in the ministries of Jesus Christ.



# The Call to Church Membership and Christian Discipleship

Whether considering church membership or examining Christian discipleship, one thing is true for Presbyterians—we believe that God has called you to this moment. That’s right—*called*. The *Book of Order*, part of our church’s constitution, tells us:

In Jesus Christ, God calls people to faith and to membership in the Church, the body of Christ. (*Book of Order*, G-1.0301)

God has actively led you to and is leading you beyond this point. The *Book of Order* delineates the dimensions of God’s call to you:

God calls a people

- a. to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- b. to follow Jesus Christ in obedient discipleship;
- c. to use the gifts and abilities God has given, honoring and serving God
  - (1) in personal life,
  - (2) in household and families,
  - (3) in daily occupations,
  - (4) in community, nation, and the world. (*Book of Order*, W-5.6001)

What does *being called* by God in Christ signify to you?

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Notice the verbs in our response to God’s call (*believe*, *follow*, and *use* gifts and abilities, [see *Book of Order*, W-5.6001]). What do the verbs tell you about the character of Christian discipleship as expressed through being a member of a Presbyterian church?

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Turn the page, and read the article on call to Christian discipleship through church membership.



## The Call of Jesus Christ in the Church

Our lives in Christian faith involve three dimensions. First comes the call of Jesus Christ to become his disciple. The second dimension is membership in the church, the community of faith where following Jesus leads us. Third is the ongoing life of being Jesus' disciple as we live in the church community and serve the world God loves.

All these aspects are distinct. However, they relate to one another. Like a three-legged stool, if any one dimension is lost, our Christian faith cannot be sustained. We need all three components as vital parts of our lives of faith. Each facet is interconnected with the others. Together they offer the robustness and fullness of Christian life and experience to which we are called by God.

*The Call of Jesus Christ.* Every journey has its starting point. A trip to the store, a visit to friends, or a vacation across the country—all have to begin somewhere. So too with the journey of faith. We have all started somewhere, at some time. We have heard the words of Jesus: “Follow me.” We have responded to his call.

For some, the call to follow came at a definite time and place. Some Christians treasure the memory of the exact instant at which the call was heard and a response was made. Perhaps the experience was very dramatic—the apostle Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9). John Wesley said he felt his heart “strangely warmed” when he heard the gospel. John Calvin spoke of his “sudden conversion.” The call to follow Jesus Christ has broken into our lives and changed them powerfully.

For others, the call to follow came quietly, in the midst of growing up in the church. The voice of Jesus was unmistakable. You said yes to that voice in the stillness and the quietness of your own heart.

Our call has come from Jesus. We did not create the call or ask to receive it. Jesus has, in an act of grace that is totally undeserved on our part, called us as he did the first disciples: “Follow me” (Mark 1:17). We have responded. We follow him.

*The Call of Jesus Christ in the Church.* Jesus called individuals into a fellowship. Jesus' message was to bring together all those who believed in him as God's Son, our Savior and Lord. In the New Testament, after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension to heaven, Christian believers were all together on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). They experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit, who came upon the whole congregation of people. As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit came to abide with believers (John 14:15–31) in the body called church, which is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The church is the company of the committed—those who have said yes to following Jesus. The church, led by the Holy Spirit of God, calls its members to faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated “church” is *ecclesia*, which refers to those who are “called out.” In the Old Testament, the equivalent term was used for the people of Israel. They were called out from the nations to be God's covenant people and called into relationship with God, who led and guided them.

Today, Jesus still calls people to follow him. They are called by God through the Holy Spirit to be God’s people—disciples of Jesus Christ who love and serve him. We are those who belong to God, members of the household of God, who are “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Ephesians 2:22). The Spirit initiates faith within us and draws us together as members of the community of faith, the church. In the church we are “one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

To be a church member means participating in the body and using the different gifts the Holy Spirit gives. We are a community of ministry. The church is not a social club, nor does it offer a membership rewards program. It is the body of Christ where we serve our Lord and Savior.

*The Call of Jesus Christ in the Church to Live as Christ’s Disciples.* God’s call to us in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit is to make us a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Those who belong to Jesus Christ as his disciples are to learn of him and serve him in all we do. We are a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:2), “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2), so that we can say with the apostle Paul, “To me, living is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

We live out our discipleship in the church as members of Christ

(1 Corinthians 6:15), where God’s Spirit leads and guides us (Galatians 5:25). We look to Jesus Christ as the norm for our conduct, living as those who “pursue love” (1 Corinthians 14:1), loving God and loving neighbor (Mark 12:30–31), and loving even enemies (Matthew 5:44). The Spirit is at work within us to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29) and to establish the fruit of the Spirit within us: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). Whatever we do in word or deed as disciples of Jesus Christ, we “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

*Our Callings.* We are called to follow Jesus as members of the church. We are called to Christian discipleship and all it means within us and among us.

Our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ will not be perfect. We will always be followers of Christ “at a distance” (Mark 15:54). There will always be a gap between our Master and us. We will fail. We will sin. We will need forgiveness—from Christ and from other people. Nevertheless, in Jesus Christ, we are given the gift of redemption and forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:14; cf. 1 John 1:9).

We are called to church membership and Christian discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ.

My thoughts and feelings about God’s threefold call to me:

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## By Grace, God Calls Us to Faith

You are the object of God's desire and a recipient of God's love. God created you in God's image and redeems you not because of what you have done or who you are—God calls you to life and faith because of God's grace. One of the ways we experience God's grace is through baptism:

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world. (*Book of Order*, W-2.3006)

Remember your baptism. Write your memories, or tell your story to a friend. What was most significant about your baptism? If you were a child at the time, what did your family tell you about your baptism?

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Note the number of times you see the word *grace* in the *Book of Order* excerpt above.

What is grace?

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In what ways have you experienced the grace of God in your life?

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What does it mean to you to be summoned or called to God's grace?

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The following statement from the baptismal liturgy is all about grace. As you discern your sense of call, read the statement at least once a day, inserting your name where indicated.

For you, little one,  
the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation,  
and the Lord God made covenants with his people.  
It was for you that the Word of God became flesh  
and lived among us, full of grace and truth.  
For you, [name], Jesus Christ suffered death  
crying out at the end, “It is finished!”  
For you Christ triumphed over death,  
rose in newness of life,  
and ascended to rule over all.  
All of this was done for you, little one,  
though you do not know any of this yet.  
But we will continue to tell you this good news  
until it becomes your own.  
And so the promise of the gospel is fulfilled:  
“We love because God first loved us.”<sup>1</sup>

Based on the prayer, how would you define God’s grace?

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1. Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “Variations on the French Reformed Church Baptismal Liturgy,” [pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/variations\\_on\\_the\\_french\\_reformed\\_church\\_baptismal\\_liturgy.pdf](http://pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/variations_on_the_french_reformed_church_baptismal_liturgy.pdf).

## God's Grace Evokes in Us Grateful Response

God calls; we respond. Grace calls; gratitude responds.

The baptism of those who enter the covenant of membership upon their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls forth a response of faithfulness. Thus, the triune God, incarnate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, gives to the Church not only its mission but also its understanding of membership. (*Book of Order*, G-1.0301)

We practice church membership and Christian discipleship as our faithful response to God's gracious call.

How have you responded to God's call in the past?

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How do you hope to respond to God's call today?

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## Living the Christian Life

We grow in faith.

In a number of ways, our Christian faith and discipleship in Jesus Christ are marked by how the Holy Spirit nurtures us. We “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). God’s power is “at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). We are aware of some of the ways that this growth takes place, but other growth occurs in ways of which we are not conscious. Nevertheless, we trust that the Spirit is at work in our lives of faith.

The church is the primary context in which our faith grows. It is the “locus” where our faith is “focused.” In the church, we worship and serve, and we study and experience fellowship with others of faith. In the midst of the church, as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), we participate in the means of grace that God gives, including the Word and Sacraments. This locates us in the midst of the Spirit’s activities where “varieties of gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:4) are given by the Spirit to be used “for the common good” (v. 7). As we experience the Spirit’s work, our lives will “bear fruit in every good work” as we “grow in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). Theologically, this is sanctification—our growth in grace and holiness.

Our growth in faith and in our Christian lives occurs through our cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Some have said that the word *grow* captures this idea, with the letters standing for “Go Right On Working.” We make choices in our growth in faith, seeking and following the guidance

of God’s Spirit within us. While the Spirit is personal in terms of our own experience, the Spirit does not isolate us from others, particularly from the church as the community of faith. As we participate in the church through worship and sacraments and in education, fellowship, and service, the Spirit provides opportunities for faith to develop. The Spirit leads us into good works for the sake of Jesus Christ and out of our love of neighbors and our care for their needs. These good works are a sign or expression of faith. They do not cause faith or become a means of justifying ourselves in the eyes of God. We were “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Ephesians 2:10), so good works express the Spirit’s work within us and our love for Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit uses elements in our Christian lives to strengthen our faith and enable our faith to grow.

*Scripture.* God’s Word to us in Scripture is a primary way God communicates with us. By the work of the Holy Spirit, our hearts and minds are illumined to hear and understand what God is saying to us. The Spirit helps us interpret Scripture even as we also use the best resources available to understand what the Scriptures mean. God’s Word and God’s Spirit together lead us into a deeper knowledge of God in Christ and help direct us in the ways God wants us to live.

*Prayer.* Prayer is conversation with God. Through prayer, we express our praise and thanks to God for who God is and what God has done. In prayer, we confess our sins to God and ask for forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We pray for others and their needs throughout the

world, and we pray for our ourselves and our own needs. Prayer is our vital lifeline with God. In prayer, we come before God in all humility, gratitude, and openness in order to seek God’s will and help while we express the deepest desires of our lives.

*Worship.* Corporate worship, when we worship in the community of faith, is the most important thing we do. In worship, we focus on God: “Through worship people attend to the presence of God in their life. From a Christian’s life in the world comes the need for worship; in worship one sees the world in light of God’s grace; from worship come vision and power for living in the world” (*Book of Order*, W-5.1002). In worship, God’s Word is proclaimed and received, calling worshipers to faithful service as disciples of Jesus Christ. A rhythm of life is from worship to service, and from service to worship.

*Ministry.* The rhythm from worship that leads to service in ministry and back again to worship enables our Christian lives to be nurtured and sustained as we live out the callings God gives to us through the Holy Spirit. Our forms of ministry will vary and are always subject to redirection

throughout our lives. Our openness to God’s Spirit helps us respond to ways of serving Jesus Christ, even when new opportunities come to us unexpectedly. Our efforts in ministry are grateful responses to God’s call to discipleship in Christ Jesus.

*Fruit of the Spirit.* Paul mentions the “fruit of the Spirit” as characteristics of Christian disciples: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). God’s Spirit works within us to develop habits of the heart as we grow in faith. The fruit of the Spirit helps us meet the challenges of ordinary living and bolsters us during times of difficulty and affliction.

The Holy Spirit’s work within us (sanctification) is an ongoing work. We will fail and sin. We will need forgiveness. We will have times of joys and times of sorrow during our lives in Christ. Nevertheless, the Spirit sustains. Jesus Christ is with us, and God’s loving care and providential guidance lead us through all things. Through it all, we “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

My thoughts on living the Christian life:

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## Faith Review

I praise and thank you, O God, for you are without beginning and without end. You created me; you guide me and care for me daily. Lead me now as I consider your promises to me and what you ask of me in Christ. Amen.

Read Philippians 3:12–14 in your Bible. Paraphrase the passage in the space below:

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Reflect on the imagery of the Christian life as a marathon race that bids us press toward a goal. In what ways does the marathon imagery inform your understanding of God's call to faith? To church membership? To Christian discipleship?

Consider your life as a marathon. List and reflect on events along the way that have made you who you are today:

- Where you were born
- Who your family is to you
- If and when you were baptized
- Your prior participation in the church
- How you have communicated with God
- Any events that made you especially aware of God

Now, complete the following sentences:

- God loves me because . . .
- Faith means . . .
- God forgives me even when . . .
- Prayer means . . .
- My faith is strong when . . .
- Commitment to Christ means . . .
- Christian discipleship means . . .
- Jesus died for . . .
- The church has been especially important to me when . . .

# Scripture and the Faith of the Church

## Faith Seeking Understanding

Our Christian lives as members of the church can be summarized in a bumper-sticker motto: “Faith Seeking Understanding.” We are people of faith who spend our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ seeking further understanding of Christ and what it means to be his disciple.

The word *disciple* means “pupil” or “learner.” “Learn from me,” Jesus told his disciples (Matthew 11:29), and they devoted themselves to lives of learning, trusting, and serving Jesus. As followers of Jesus spread the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ and as churches were established, people in churches sought instruction on what it meant to live as Christ’s disciples. What we have today as the books of the New Testament open for us the message of Christ, what followers of Jesus Christ should believe and do as Christian people.

Today, the Scriptures of the church, the Old and New Testaments, are ways we learn of God and God’s work in Jesus. God chose Israel in the Old Testament, calling the nation into a covenant relationship with God so that the people could serve God in the world. God sent Jesus Christ

into the world to widen the covenant relationship to include all people. Jesus called all persons to follow him and be his disciples.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a responsible church member, we dedicate ourselves to studying Scripture, using the best resources possible. We are to study the Scriptures, pray about the Scriptures, and use the reflections of scholars and others who can help us understand what the Scriptures meant when they were written and what they mean for us today. God gives us resources to help us along our way. We study in faith in order to understand who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do as disciples of Jesus Christ. We devote ourselves to learning about Christ and serving him in the church and in the world.

The motto “Faith seeking understanding” is associated with the early church theologian Augustine (354–430). Augustine believed that what makes a Christian is faith in Jesus Christ. It is where we begin. We say yes to the invitation to follow Jesus, to live in his way, and to serve others because God has served us in Jesus Christ (Luke 22:27).

Our faith, said Augustine, propels us to seek understanding. As he put it, “I believe in order that I may understand.” Christians continuously seek to understand what they believe. We want to know what we should love. We want to know what we can hope for in life. We want to know how Jesus Christ wants us to live. To learn these things, we study the Scriptures and listen to the faith of the Christian church that has gone before us. Our love for Christ and desire to learn of him open us to hearing what others of faith who have loved Christ have said.

The Christian church has a long tradition of theology, or the study of God. Christian theologians have listened, prayed, and studied. They have asked questions to help the whole Christian community of disciples understand our faith. Studying the faith of the church, as theologians and official church documents have expressed it, is an excellent way to grow in Christian discipleship and “grow in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our *Book of Confessions* is an excellent resource for growing in faith and understanding.

To begin in faith and press on to understanding offers great freedom and possibilities in the church. As we seek deeper understanding, we can question our faith. We can ask the deep questions of human life and seek resources of faith to help us learn God’s will and ways. We are free to engage in dialogue with others both within and outside the church to gain insights. Our hearts and minds are open to what God will show us as we step out in faith and ask questions.

Our lives in faith are a continuing dialogue between us and God and between us and others. Our dialogues can take place as we read the Scriptures, praying that God through the Holy Spirit will speak to us and illumine our minds and hearts to communicate what God wants us to know and to be. Our dialogues can take place in prayer as we are in conversation with God—speaking to God of our questions or desires and trusting God to communicate to us—sometimes in ways we may not imagine—what God wants us to know and to be. Then also, our dialogues can take place as we participate in the community of faith as members of the church. In the church, we can receive insights of sisters and brothers in Christ who share their faith and understandings with us. They may be seated next to us in a worship service or an education class, or they may speak to us from the pages of a commentary on the Bible or a book on theology. We are open to new ways and directions in Christian understanding as we launch out in faith. In all this, we trust God’s Holy Spirit to lead us.

Christians throughout the centuries have found that our faith and our understanding benefit each other. Our faith drives us to seek understanding. We believe in order to understand. As we gain theological understanding, our Christian faith is deepened. We now have a wider and deeper perception of who God is and what God is calling us to believe and do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

But perhaps most of all our seeking understanding as people of faith brings us joy. The medieval theologian Anselm (c. 1033–1109) wrote, “I pray, O God, to know thee, to love thee, that I may

rejoice in thee.”<sup>1</sup> We pray in faith; we learn in faith; and we love in faith so that we may gain understanding . . . and joy!

My thoughts on faith seeking understanding:

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1. Anselm, *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 33.

## The Bible and Me

- Write about each Bible you own or use, explaining how you got it and/or who gave it to you.
  
- Write a memory of using the Bible during your childhood and youth. What is your earliest memory involving a Bible?

Read the Bible passages listed below that describe how Jesus used the Scriptures:

- Luke 2:41–52 (Jesus discusses the Scriptures with the teachers in the temple at age twelve.) As you read, listen for clues about how Jesus used the Scriptures. Why did Jesus use the Scriptures in this way?
- Luke 4:1–13 (Jesus responds to three temptations by citing Scriptures about God’s intentions.) Identify each temptation and Jesus’ response.
- Luke 4:16–21 (Jesus describes the purpose and goal of his life by citing Scripture.) Decide how Jesus was using Scriptures here.
- Matthew 21:12–13. Compare with Mark 11:15–17. (Jesus drives the moneychangers from the temple.) Decide how Jesus was using Scriptures here.
- Matthew 19:1–9 (Jesus argues with the teachers about marriage and divorce by referring to Scripture.) Put the teacher’s questions and Jesus’ answers in your own words. Decide how Jesus used Scripture in this passage.
- Mark 15:33–37 (On the cross Jesus prays as he copes with his physical and emotional pain.) Note the connection between Jesus’ prayer and Psalm 22. Why might Jesus have prayed this psalm on the cross?

Review the list. Which of these uses of Scripture do you need in your life?

## **Ways to Study the Bible**

Which of the ways listed below do you now practice? Which could help you in your daily routines? Which could help you in your personal spiritual life? Which could help you when you meet with others to study the Bible? Which of the listed ways sounds the hardest to you? Which is the one you need most to work on?

- Read or listen to a Bible verse or verses being read. Do it again and again until the words are etched in your memory.
- When difficult words stump you or when you suspect that familiar words might have more to them than you recognize, look them up in a Bible dictionary.
- Develop a storehouse of memory so that you can recall the stories, events, and characters of the Bible.
- Memorize verses of the Bible, especially those that seem to speak most directly to you and your concerns.
- Pray and meditate. Mull a verse or verses of the Bible over in your mind. What questions arise that you want to ask God about? Ask those questions. What challenges does the verse or passage pose for you? Talk with God about your doubts and fears.
- Refer to a commentary. Consider the views of scholars about passages you find hard to understand. Compare more than one commentary.
- Listen to others in the church. Sermons are interpretations of Scripture. Church school classes address the Scriptures. Talk, study, and pray with other church members; they may help you understand the Scriptures.
- Check a concordance. Choose words that you think you understand. Look up other references to them. You may discover shades of meaning or uses that help you better appreciate familiar words.
- Consider the official pronouncements of the denomination; they are rooted in the Scriptures.

## ***Lectio Divina* or Prayerful Reading**

Christians around the world have used the *lectio divina* method of praying the Scriptures for centuries. There are four steps:

1. Read a short passage of Scripture.
2. Think about its meaning by answering three questions:
  - What did it mean for the people then?
  - What does it mean for me today?
  - What does it mean for us, God's people, today?
3. Respond to it. Commit yourself to making some changes in light of what you read.

Write a poem, draw a picture, or create something that expresses your feelings.

4. Share/Celebrate the passage with God. Talk to God about the passage and whatever it brings to your attention. Be quiet so that God can speak to you.

Try the method with one or more of the following passages:

Luke 10:25–37	The Parable of the Good Samaritan
Psalms 139	A Psalm Celebrating God's Loving Knowledge of Us
1 Corinthians 12:1–11	Paul's Teachings about Gifts of the Spirit
1 Samuel 24	The Story of David Sparing Saul's Life

Challenge: Apply the *lectio divina* method of praying the Bible to one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John). Reading a Gospel in its entirety according to the *lectio divina* discipline will help you establish a pattern of Bible study and prayer. When you finish the Gospel, you will be prepared to study any book of the Bible.



## Proclaiming the Good News

Jesus came preaching.

We hear this first in the Gospel of Mark: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news [gospel] of God” (Mark 1:14). His message of good news was “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15).

Jesus’ public ministry centered in his proclamation of good news in both word and deed. What Jesus said and what Jesus did were a unified witness to God’s loving actions in establishing the reign or kingdom of God on earth. In Jesus’ ministry God’s reign had “come near,” and now a new reality is underway. Now all people can experience God’s continuing presence. They can be united with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Early church theologians called the kingdom (Gr. *autobasileia*) a “self-kingdom.” In Jesus Christ himself God’s kingdom has come.’

Now those who follow Jesus as disciples participate in God’s great purposes for the world; we do so in the lives we live day by day. It is astounding news! Persons can now repent and turn from their sin. We can believe the good news Jesus proclaimed. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection form the core of the Christian gospel that the church now proclaims and in which contemporary disciples of Jesus Christ can participate. These are the amazing results of what happened when Jesus came preaching!

Participation in the life of the church leads us to experience—and do—various forms of proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. Proclaiming

the good news happens both formally and informally. Our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition has always emphasized the importance of preaching as central to the church’s life. We preach and listen.

Since the days of the Protestant Reformation, Reformed churches have believed that “the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God” (*Book of Confessions*, 5.004). That is, as the Scriptures are interpreted and proclaimed to a gathered congregation, the word of God, or God’s message to the people, is communicated. This communication is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. As Paul put it, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is a way faith emerges. It is a way the church’s message of the gospel is shared. Proclamation is what Jesus instructed his disciples to do: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

The church formally proclaims the gospel in services of worship. In Presbyterian churches, worship services are always to include the preaching of the Word. In this, the church is witnessing or testifying to God’s self-revelation, all of what God has done, centering in God’s becoming a human person in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel message proclaimed in Scripture. In our tradition “the preached Word or sermon is to be based on the written Word,” and the sermon preached “should present the gospel with simplicity and clarity, in



language which can be understood by the people” (*Book of Order*, W-2.2007).

Other forms of proclamation of the Word can also take place in worship services. These include music and singing based on the Scriptures “which present the truth of the biblical faith.” In addition, “drama and dance, poetry and pageant, indeed, most other human art forms are also expressions through which the people of God have proclaimed and responded to the Word” (*Book of Order*, W-2.2008).

Participation in God’s mission in the world means that the church will proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in deeds as well as words. Jesus’ preaching and teaching were also expressed in his acts of mercy and healing. Jesus was called “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19). Time and time again, Jesus’ compassion burst forth and led to his meeting both the physical and spiritual needs of people: “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick” (Matthew 14:14). The involvements of disciples of Jesus Christ in deeds of love, compassion, mercy, healing, justice, peacemaking, and so much else emerge from their commitments to the Christ who himself embodied the reign of God.

The church follows Jesus in proclaiming good news in word and deed. Christian disciples also proclaim the good news in word and deed in nonformal ways.

Verbal witness to the gospel happens when persons share their faith with one another by talking about Jesus Christ. Sharing faith in this way takes place in a variety of contexts in the course of human interactions and the events of life. Honest expressions of who Jesus is and what Christian faith can mean in a person’s life witness to the gospel as a proclamation of who God is and what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Christ’s disciples also proclaim the gospel in deeds of love and expressions of compassion and care for others.’ A most dramatic expression of the active life of love is Jesus’ parable of the Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46). Those who had ministered to those in need—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned—are told that by doing these things for others, they had been ministering to Jesus himself: “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40). Those who served others were proclaiming the gospel of Christ in deeds of love and service to others.

Jesus came preaching. So should we . . . in word and deed!

My thoughts on proclaiming the good news:

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## What's the Good News?

What types of good news generate excitement and joy in your everyday life? List events that excite you.

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Now, imagine what it would be like not to be allowed to share your good news.

## The Gospel as Good News

Consider the gospel as good and exciting news. Below are listed specific biblical stories that can be identified as good news.

Imagine you live in Jesus' time and culture—no medical or dental care, no organized social welfare programs, and no rights for women. As you read the passages below, imagine the good news of these Gospel stories against this backdrop of history:

Luke 19:1–10 Jesus befriends the tax collector, Zacchaeus. He proclaims that Zacchaeus is loved and worthy of friendship.

Luke 23:32–43 Jesus proclaims forgiveness to a dying thief.

Luke 21:1–4 Jesus proclaims that a widow's small gift is appreciated by God.

Luke 8:42–48 Jesus notices a woman lost in a crowd and demonstrates that she is important.

Answer the following questions about each reading from Luke:

- What good news did Jesus proclaim?
- How did Jesus proclaim his message?
- How is the gospel of Jesus good news for me?

There are many dimensions to proclaiming the good news of the gospel. We can

- see and respond with kindness to the needs of people around us.
- love and respect others as sisters and brothers in Christ.
- forgive enemies.
- reach out to forgotten and unloved people.
- show vital and authentic faith in words, actions, and our use of time and resources.

All Christians have unique and God-given personalities and gifts that shape how they tell the good news. Not everyone's story will be the same, nor will everyone tell the story the same way, but all can share the good news of God's love for the world, as shown by Jesus Christ, in their own ways. So can you!



# **Sessions for Group Study**



# The Call to Church Membership and Christian Discipleship

## Preparing to Lead

Read section 1: “The Call to Church Membership and Christian Discipleship” (pp. 5–13).

Read this study session, and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music to help the group sing the hymn.

## Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next session.
- Provide Bibles and hymnals.
- Since this is the first session, agree on simple “ground rules” and logistics (e.g., time to begin and end the session, location for meetings, welcoming all points of view, confidentiality, etc.). Encourage participants to bring copies of this book and Bibles.
- Review the format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

## Opening Worship

### Prayer (unison)

O Lord Jesus Christ, be with us and lead us in your way, helping us to trust you as we go. Amen.

## Spiritual Reading

- Read aloud Mark 1:16–20. Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, read the passage a second time, and invite all to listen for a word or phrase that speaks to them and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the words or phrases that spoke most deeply to them.

## Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

*(spoken prayers may be offered.)*

O Lord Jesus, help us know the opportunity of discipleship so that as we follow you we will experience the true life you want us to have as your church. Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .” *(continue praying your congregation’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.)*

## Conversation

- Invite each member of the group to share a brief story about being called. Then reflect on common themes or characteristics from the stories.
- Note that Mark 1:16–20 records Jesus’ call to the first disciples. Ask: *What are some of your reflections on Mark 1:16–20? What does the passage tell us about being called to Christian discipleship?*
- Review section 1: “The Call to Church Membership and Christian Discipleship” (pp. 5–13). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the readings.
- Invite members of the group to name questions or reservations they may have about being called to Christian discipleship through church membership.
- Review “By Grace, God Calls to Faith” (p. 8). Challenge one another to name what God’s grace means to them.
- Note that Philippians 3:12–14 is one of the most familiar Bible passages about the ongoing life of faith. Ask: *What are some of your reflections on Philippians 3:12–14? What does the passage tell us about evaluating our personal faith?*
- Wonder together about the means of grace the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen and develop our faith (pp. 11–12). Invite each member of the group to share a brief story about experiences with Scripture, prayer, worship, ministry, and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Reflect on common themes or characteristics from the stories.
- Review the section “Faith Review” (p. 13). Invite members of the group to share their personal stories of faith.

## Conclusion

Pray the prayer from the French Reformed Church Baptismal Liturgy (see footnote 1 on p. 9). Conclude the prayer with the following response:

Leader: O God, help us face the future with the assurance of your grace.

All: Amen.

## Hymn

“Amazing Grace”