

# Theology for Presbyterians

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## **Meet the Writer**

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## **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!

# The Bible for Presbyterians

## Scripture

Hebrews 1:1–2; 2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21

## Main Idea

Just because Presbyterians don't always interpret the Bible literally does not mean we don't take it seriously. It is unique in its authority and our primary way of knowing God.

## Teaching Points

The session invites learners to consider:

1. What it means to believe the Bible is the Word of God.
2. How the Holy Spirit is involved in the Bible.
3. How the Bible could be more important in our lives.

## Resources Needed

Bibles (three versions: NRSV, King James Version, The Message)

Participant's Book

Card stock

Scissors

Colored markers

## Leader Prep

The centrality of Scripture and the diversity of interpretation are hallmarks of the Reformed tradition. Members of your group may hold a variety of views regarding the authority of the Bible. Some may read Scripture literally, while others do not. The *Book of Order* encourages civil and respectful discourse about such things: “. . . we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which [persons] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (G-1.0305).

Understanding revelation, authority, and inspiration is an important aspect to achieving a respectful discourse about the nature of Scripture.

*Revelation.* God is known or “revealed” in Scripture. God “makes the first move.” Without this, we would never know who God is, or what God does. This is the source of our thankfulness and joy for Scripture.

*Authority.* The church affirms the Bible as authoritative because it is where we learn of God and the way to live our lives. Scripture’s authority is not “coercive.”

*Inspiration.* The church affirms God was at work, through the Holy Spirit, in the production of Scripture. Second Timothy does not give us some “theory of inspiration.” We shouldn’t be hung up on trying to figure out how the Holy Spirit worked with the biblical writers. Second Peter indicates the Spirit worked with human persons. The personalities of biblical writers were not overridden and they were not given “special knowledge” (such as anticipating the findings of modern science!). God used the humans to carry out God’s work of providing Scripture.

If you are familiar and comfortable with the practice of *lectio divina*, invite the group to practice this with the 2 Peter passage during the Heart section. (Visit [pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm](http://pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm) for a version of this process.)

## **Leading the Session**

### **Gather**

- It is always important to check in on the lives of your group members. If you have not been together before, let group members introduce themselves. Are there joys or concerns, or new people to welcome? Offer an opening prayer.
- Invite the group to respect one another’s opinions regarding their views of the Bible. Begin a discussion from less threatening to more challenging questions. Invite group members to tell stories of their favorite memories of the Bible. These could include: family Bibles that held a central place in the home; favorite books or stories in the Bible; and the like.
- Ask the group to talk about controversies related to the Bible in the church, at work, among friends. How difficult is it to talk about the Bible with other people?
- Ask: *Did you ever try to explain your faith to someone who did not value the Bible as a unique book? What happened? Did you ever try to explain a position of faith to someone who did not think you took the Bible seriously enough? What happened?*

## Head

- Dr. McKim contends: “The church has called Scripture ‘Word of God’ because it is our source of knowing God’s will and purposes. We know what God wants because of what God has communicated.”
- Ask: *What are advantages and disadvantages of using the word “Scripture” and the phrase “Word of God” to describe the Bible? What is “bibliolatry”?*
- Ask: *Does “Word of God” mean that every word in the Bible is to be understood and interpreted literally? Why? Why not?*
- Ask: *When the preacher introduces the reading of Scripture during worship, does he or she use the phrase “Listen for God’s Word” or “Hear God’s Word”? What can you imagine is the theological difference between these two statements?*
- Dr. McKim uses three traditional theological terms to describe what we believe: revelation, authority, and inspiration. Ask: *What difference does it make to believe that God seeks to be revealed in Scripture? How does believing it is authoritative affect your reading?*
- Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17 and 2 Peter 1:19–21 in three different Bible versions. Invite the group to wonder: In what way is a Bible translation an interpretation of the text? What differences in meaning are conveyed by the different versions?
- Dr. McKim writes: “The Spirit worked in and through human persons, with all their varying personalities. Therefore, ‘inspiration’ has a ‘divine’ origin but is also a very ‘human’ activity.”
- Ask: *Do you agree with Dr. McKim’s view of the divine and human aspects of Scripture? Does allowing for human activity in the writing of Scripture affect its authority? In what ways have you experienced or witnessed tension in the church based on the human and the divine aspects of Scripture?*

## Heart

- The Spirit is always involved in revealing God. Ask: *How does Dr. McKim say the Spirit is involved when we read the Bible? Can anyone share a time when they felt they found their answer or guidance from reading or remembering the Bible?*
- Dr. McKim points out that just as the Spirit helps us interpret the Word, the Word also helps us interpret the Spirit. When we feel the Spirit leading us toward a certain action, we can test that against what we know from the Bible. We believe the

Holy Spirit will not lead us against what Scripture teaches.  
Ask: *What implications does this belief have for your faith and for how you live?*

### **Hands**

- Ask: *Imagine that a co-worker sees your Bible in your briefcase and questions your beliefs about it. How would you explain your view of the Bible's inspiration and authority? Could you describe the Reformed/Presbyterian view?*
- Ask: *If your son or daughter were leaving home for college or military service, what is the most important thing you would like them to know from the Bible? Why?*
- Option: If you have time, read 2 Peter 1:19–21 using a *lectio divina* process. (Visit [pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm](http://pcusa.org/spiritualformation/practices.htm) for a version of this process.)

### **Depart**

- Ask: *Do any of you have a particular discipline for Bible reading that works well for you? Considering the activity of the Spirit we have talked about, what are the advantages of also studying the Bible in a group like ours?*
- The *Book of Order* (W-2.2001) claims that wherever the Word of God is read, Jesus Christ the Living Word is present. Scripture reading is central to every Presbyterian worship service; a Prayer for Illumination usually precedes the reading.
- Pass out the card stock, scissors, and colored markers. Ask group members to create “Prayer for Illumination” bookmarks for their Bibles. Have them cut the card stock into 2½-inch-wide strips and write short sentence prayers, such as, “Holy Spirit, open my eyes.” Suggest that they can use the bookmarks to prepare to listen for God whenever they read Scripture.
- Close with prayer.



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# The Bible for Presbyterians

## Scripture

**Hebrews 1:1–2** This passage points us to God’s speaking to the people of Israel and then most fully in Jesus Christ.

**2 Timothy 3:14–17** This passage points us to the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the Scriptures and their practical use in our lives.

**2 Peter 1:19–21** This passage speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring humans to convey God’s Word.

## Prayer

O God, your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Thank you for speaking to us and revealing your divine will and desires for this world. We praise you for the Holy Scriptures, which enable us to know you and through which you reach out to love us in Jesus Christ. Open us to hear your Word, to obey, and to live lives of service to you in the church and in the world. Bless us by your Word. Help us to share your Word with others. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Introduction

A man went into a bookstore and asked the owner if the store sold Bibles. The owner replied, “No, but I have something just as good.”

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians join with other Christians in rejecting this assessment. There is nothing “just as good” as the Bible!

Holy Scripture holds a unique and authoritative place in the life of Christian churches. Our tradition has been especially concerned about grounding our theological understandings in Scripture and affirming the key place of the Bible in our lives of faith. We emphasize not only what the Bible is, but what the Bible does. This is not to say that we wish to practice “bibliolatry”—the “worship” of the Scriptures, in and of themselves. Sometimes, unfortunately, Reformed Christians may give that impression.

Rather, we see the Bible as central to Christian faith, not because it possesses special “powers” in a “Harry Potter” kind of way. Rather, Scripture is our primary source of knowing who God is and what God has done, especially in Jesus Christ. For this reason, we

recognize the Bible's unique status. The Bible is where we turn to learn about our Christian faith. In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the church hears the voice of God and sees the actions of God as in no other place.

Often, controversies in the church can be traced to different views about the nature of the Bible and its appropriate interpretation. So it is helpful to consider what kind of book we believe the Bible to be and what its important characteristics are.

If one believes the Bible is intended to convey information that is historically and scientifically verifiable to contemporary people, then one will interpret the Bible in that light. If the nature of the Bible is seen as a record of the religious experiences of ancient peoples whereby issues of historical or scientific “accuracy” are not important, then a different perspective on interpretation will emerge. Conflicting interpretations of texts follow from these different views of the nature of Scripture. These clashes can generate more “heat” than “light”!

## **Word of God**

An important and familiar description of the Bible is “Word of God.” This was an emphasis of the Protestant Reformation that was captured by the Reformed leader Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who wrote in *The Second Helvetic Confession*: “We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>1</sup>

Several important ideas are here. The first is that we believe both the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God. Sometimes the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) is slighted in the church. Some think the Old Testament is not as important as the New, or that the Old Testament is just a “prelude” to the New Testament and the coming of Jesus.

However, the Christian church early rejected the view that the two Testaments are not equal to each other. Reformed churches have always emphasized that both the Old and New Testaments convey to us who God is and what God has done. The Old Testament anticipates the New Testament; and the New Testament must be

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions: Study Guide* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 5.001.

understood in light of what God was doing in the Old Testament. Therefore, the Bible is “one book” with its two testaments. It is “one book” in the sense that there is continuity between the God of Israel, found in the Old Testament, and the God of the New Testament, who is known in Jesus Christ.

A second important thing to notice is that God speaks through the Scriptures, both in the past and in the present. The book of Hebrews begins by saying: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1). Throughout the Old Testament, we find God “speaking” and that “the word of the Lord came to . . .”<sup>2</sup>

God’s “speaking” of God’s “word” is active and powerful. It brings immediate results, as when “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). God’s speaking express God’s will and purposes. When God speaks, things happen! Things happen because it is God’s desire. “Word of God” is an expression of how God’s will is enacted.

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The church has called Scripture the “Word of God” because it is our source of knowing God’s will and purposes. We know what God wants because of what God has communicated. Scripture is the record or witness of people of faith who have passed along the writings and traditions of what they believe God has said and done. All this makes the Bible a very special and unique book. The Christian conviction is that Scripture can be called “Word of God.”

## **Revelation, Authority, Inspiration**

To designate Scripture as “Word of God” does not answer every question. Far from it! Some further terms are needed to gain a fuller picture of what the church believes the nature of Scripture to be.

*Revelation.* One important term is “revelation.” This word may make you think of the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

2. See, among many references, the following: 1 Samuel 3:21—4:1a; Jeremiah 1:4; Ezekiel 7:1; Jonah 1:1; Hosea 4:1; etc.

The term itself means an “uncovering,” a “revealing.” What is hidden is now made known. The book of Revelation “unveils” God’s actions, although with all the strange images in that book, its interpretation is not easy!

Theologically, “revelation” means the God who is “hidden” has now been “made known.” The great God, the creator of all things, has communicated with humans and has become “known.” God has been “revealed.”

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The Bible is considered the “revelation of God” because it is through Scripture that God is known. Through Scripture God communicates God’s self to human beings. The Bible tells us of a God who is creator and redeemer of the world and of the humans within it.

God “makes the first move” to become known to us human beings. In the church, we receive the Scriptures as the “place” where we encounter the creator and redeemer God, and where the will and purposes of God are made known. The Bible is the source of our knowledge of God, the source of God’s revelation. The Bible is the means of God’s self-communication.

*Authority.* A second important term associated with the Bible is “authority.” This term can have many meanings. The church speaks of the authority of Scripture. However, “authority” refers to the way in which God’s revelation in Scripture becomes “real” for us, here and now. It is a way of recognizing who God is and what God has done and responding to these realities. God’s revelation in Scripture has an importance, a value, a normative influence—or “authority” for our lives.

Through the Scriptures, God speaks. We listen for God’s voice in Scripture. We affirm it is in the Scriptures that the church “hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.”<sup>3</sup> The Bible has authority because it conveys to us the Word of God.

3. *The Confession of 1967*, in *The Book of Confessions*, Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. Copyright © 2004 by the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 9.27.

*Inspiration.* Christians have also confessed that Scripture is “inspired” by God. Two New Testament verses have been important in understanding what is involved here.

Second Timothy 3:16–17 indicates that the Holy Spirit inspires Scripture that it may be “useful” to equip “everyone who belongs to God” for “every good work.” The inspiration of Scripture is by the Holy Spirit, and Scripture is given to carry out very practical purposes.

Second Peter 1:21 indicates that the Holy Spirit inspires persons who “spoke from God.” The Spirit works in and through human persons, with all their varying personalities. Therefore, “inspiration” has a “divine” origin, but is also a very “human” activity.

## **Word and Spirit**

The Bible is the source of it all, the place to which we turn to come to know God—who God is and what God has done, and to know what God wills and desires for the life and ministries of God’s people.

In the Reformed tradition, we believe people come to recognize Scripture as the Word of God or the revelation of God by the work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin spoke of the “internal witness [testimony] of the Holy Spirit,” which brings us this conviction. Calvin wrote: “We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> For, the Word will not find acceptance in the human heart “before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> We do not need to try to produce reasons why Scripture is the Word of God. We can proclaim the Scriptures as they point to Jesus Christ and trust the inner work of the Holy Spirit to bring the conviction that Scripture is God’s Word, just as the Spirit witnesses to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

We believe “Word” and “Spirit” are inextricably bound up together. The Spirit inspired the Word. The Spirit illuminates our hearts to recognize Scripture as God’s Word. The Spirit also helps us interpret Scripture in the church. The Spirit makes Scripture “come alive” for us. This is why we say a Prayer for Illumination immediately before the reading of Scripture in our worship services.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.4. Cf. 3.11; 3.1.3f; 3.2.15, 33-36.

5. *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

The Word of God also helps us interpret the Holy Spirit. Often people think the Holy Spirit is calling them to pursue a certain direction or action. One “test” is to ask whether the decision or action is in accord with what we find in God’s revelation. The Holy Spirit will not lead us in directions contrary to what Scripture teaches. Word and Spirit work together to bring us to theological insights and understandings.

The Bible is vitally important for us as Reformed and Presbyterian Christians. We try to say what we believe about Scripture. However, Scripture is more than simply a “dead letter” or a theological idea. God speaks to us in the church and as individuals by the Holy Spirit through a “living document.” To know God and God’s will, we turn to the Bible. We listen, we hear, and we obey the voice of the God who is revealed to us in the Scriptures and most supremely in Jesus Christ.

### **Spiritual Practice**

Offer prayers of thanksgiving for the experiences in which God has guided you by means of the reading of Scripture.

Think of areas in life where you need God’s direction. Ask God to help you interpret Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit and to lead you in God’s ways.

### **Questions for Reflection**

What are some other ways to describe the nature of Scripture besides “Word of God”?

What are the dangers of overemphasizing either “Word” or “Spirit” and not seeing ways the two work together?

In what ways does Scripture function in the church? in your own life?

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