

The Great Ends of the Church

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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!

Mission Statements

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:14–21

Main Idea

The great ends of the church provide a holistic vision of the church's life and offer the church a mission statement *par excellence*. They set before us six foundational works of the church that express who and what the church is called to be and how the church is called to act.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. The great ends in their context in the *Book of Order*.
2. The interconnected unity of the great ends.
3. The great ends' pointed specificity and their inherent challenges to faithful living.

Resources Needed

Christ candle, matches

Bibles

Participant's books

Newsprint, markers

Copies of the *Book of Order*

Prepared handouts of your congregation's mission statement
(if applicable)

Copies of your congregation's monthly calendar

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

Leader Prep

Read the participant's book, underline its major points, highlight questions to pursue, and note significant insights. Become familiar with the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity in the *Book of Order*.

Involve the participants by sharing in the readings of the Scriptures, quotations, and prayers. At times, you may want to write the words on newsprint or reproduce on handouts.

For Gather, place a Christ candle in the center of your teaching space. Each session begins by lighting the candle, reading Scripture, and uniting in prayer. Enlist members of the group to share in the reading and in lighting the Christ candle.

In introducing the course, refer to the introduction of Dr. Donald McKim, editor of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*. He writes, "The six great ends are to be taken as a whole. The fullness of the gospel is expressed as the church witnesses to the different dimensions toward which the great ends point us. The church's ministries—and our own—are energized when we realize ways the gospel can be lived out."

For Head, you will need one copy of the *Book of Order* for every two participants. Printed copies and downloadable copies of the *Book of Confessions* and the latest edition of the *Book of Order* are available at store.pcusa.org. If your congregation has a mission statement, prepare handouts of it.

In Heart and elsewhere, provide time for the participants to respond to the questions you ask, especially those in which they will share something personal. Do not be nervous about moments of silence. Most people need time to think and prepare their thoughts. The Holy Spirit is at work! You may want to occasionally change the pace by posting written questions.

For Hands, provide recent copies of your congregation's calendar of monthly activities.

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

Leading the Session

Gather

- As participants arrive, invite the group to create an acrostic with the letters in the word *PRESBYTERIAN*. Write the letters vertically down a sheet of newsprint. Ask the participants to think of phrases that describe who we are as Presbyterians, using each letter in the word *PRESBYTERIAN* as the first letter (e.g., "P = Presbyters are elders called by

God” or “P = Priesthood of all believers means we each can serve God”). Write each phrase on the newsprint next to the letter it refers to. Invite the group to review the acrostic and to name descriptors that might be missing.

- Introduce the session by emphasizing the purpose of this study: to learn the substance of the great ends of the church and apply them to our personal and communal faith. Preview the six sessions in the participant’s book.
- Light the Christ candle while a volunteer reads aloud 2 Corinthians 5:14–21.
- Ask a volunteer to pray aloud the prayer in the participant’s book (p. 5).

Head

- Introduce the *Book of Order* as the second part of the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*. Explain that the first part is called the *Book of Confessions*. These two books are subordinate to the Scriptures and are informed by them.
- Distribute copies of the *Book of Order*. Invite the group to turn to the first chapter of the *Book of Order* (“The Mission of the Church”), which sets forth the foundational principles we hold. Read the first section of chapter 1 (F-1.01, “God’s Mission”). Following the reading, ask: *What do you hear in the words? What do the words lead you to believe, say, or do?*
- Refer the group to the second section of chapter 1 (F-1.02, “Jesus Christ Is Head of the Church”). Form four groups, and have them read the following:
 - Group 1: F-1.0201, “The Authority of Christ”
 - Group 2: F-1.0202, “Christ Calls and Equips the Church”
 - Group 3: F-1.0203, “Christ Gives the Church Its Life”
 - Group 4: F-1.0204, “Christ Is the Church’s Hope”
 - All: F-1.0205, “Christ Is the Foundation of the Church”
- Ask: *In your own words, how would you describe the Presbyterian view of the relationship between Christ and the church? Between the church and its mission?*
- Explain that F-1.0202, “Christ Calls and Equips the Church,” leads us to explore the purpose of this study. Read F-1.0202 again, and ask: *What does F-1.0202 promise the church? What does it challenge the church to do?*

- Point out that the great ends of the church appears in F-1.03, “The Calling of the Church.” Review the section titles in F-1.03: “The Church Is the Body of Christ,” “The Marks of the Church,” “The Notes of the Reformed Church,” and “The Great Ends of the Church.” Invite the group to offer comments and observations on how the titles reflect aspects of the calling of the church.
- Read the great ends of the church together, using either the *Book of Order* or the participant’s book (p. 6). Challenge the group members to memorize the great ends.
- If your church has a mission statement, review it now. Invite the group to find correlations between the statement and the great ends. Ask: *How well does our church’s mission statement reflect the great ends? What is missing? Why?*

Heart

- Dr. Small writes: “The great ends of the church is not a list of disconnected items, but a holistic vision of the church’s life. The church cannot be faithful to the intention of the great ends by emphasizing some while neglecting others. These basic purposes of the church do not allow us to stress proclamation of the gospel while neglecting nurture within the congregation, or to promote social righteousness while failing to guard the truth of Christian doctrine. The great purposes of the church are intimately related to one another; none can be fully understood apart from its relation to each of the others and to the whole.”
- Invite the group to reason why Dr. Small offers that corrective statement early in the study. Ask: *What is at stake for the church in the co-unity of the ends? How does our church emphasize one or more of the ends to the neglect of others? Which of the six great purposes of the church most challenges you? Your congregation?*
- Read Dr. Small’s bulleted list about the interconnectedness of the great ends (p. 7). Explain that the pairings will provide structure to the study, especially sessions 3–5. Ask the participants—especially those already familiar with the great ends—to offer feelings and observations about Dr. Small’s pairings.

Hands

- Dr. Small writes: “The great ends spur us to action. They do not ask us to contemplate the nobility of their aims, but to commit ourselves to move toward their fulfillment.” Ask: *In what ways might the great ends of the church be a guide for how we live God’s new Way in the world? What obstacles do you see in adopting the great ends as our church’s mission statement?*
- Distribute copies of your congregation’s monthly calendar. Ask the group to review the activities and events promoted by the church. Invite the participants to choose one of the activities on the calendar. Ask them to reflect on the relationship between that particular activity and Dr. Small’s bulleted list that demonstrates the “pointed specificity” of the great ends of the church (pp. 8–9).
- Ask: *Why do we promote this activity? How does this activity express what we say we believe about the church’s mission? How might we adapt this activity according to the pointed specificity of each great end? Based on our study of the great ends, what is missing from our church’s calendar? Are we willing to suspend an activity or event if it does not correspond to the spirit and substance of the great ends? Why or why not?*

Depart

- Revisit the *PRESBYTERIAN* acrostic from Gather. Invite the participants to add, subtract, or change anything to express what they have learned in this session.
- Explain that you will read the following statements and invite the group members to complete each one with the corresponding great end. Be patient—this may take a few repetitions:
 - I/we will proclaim . . .
 - I/we will shelter and nurture . . .
 - I/we will maintain . . .
 - I/we will preserve . . .
 - I/we will promote . . .
 - I/we will exhibit . . .

- Sing or read together “Will You Come and Follow Me (The Summons).” Help the participants notice how the song invites them to respond to God’s call and gives many examples of what God’s call might entail. Pray the closing prayer:
God, you call us and invite us into the greatest adventure we could ever hope for. In you we live and move and have our being, and we are safe in your love. You claimed us in our baptisms. Now you send us out to serve a hurting world, to bring good news, and even to risk hostile stares. Help us hear your voice and follow your lead with the hope, courage, and love you provide. Amen.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.

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Mission Statements

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:14–21 The church does not live for itself, but for Christ.

Prayer

Holy God: you have chosen us to serve you, and appointed us the agents of your love. We thank you for prophets who recall us to your will. We are grateful for every impulse to confess and correct wrongs, to keep faith pure and purposes faithful. We praise you for your Holy Spirit always reforming the church, so we may better serve as disciples of your Son, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.¹

Introduction

Mission statements—every organization seems to have one. Grocery chains, oil producers, pharmaceutical companies, and social networking services all devise pithy statements designed to communicate their noble purpose and efficient service. Christian congregations are no exception. We regularly adopt brief mission statements describing who we are, communicating a vibrant vision of faith and action. Our congregational self-descriptions are usually abstract idealizations, possibly intended more in hope than as actual depiction. Perhaps that is why they are so easily forgotten.

For more than a half century, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has embedded a brief mission statement in its *Book of Order*. An inventory of the great ends of the church, first articulated in 1910 by one of the PC(USA)'s predecessor denominations—the United Presbyterian Church of North America—was incorporated into the denominational unions of 1958 and 1983.

1. *The Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 161. Used with permission.

The great ends of the church are:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children
of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.²

The great ends of the church is not a typical mission statement. Instead of setting out an idealized description of who we are, it challenges us by telling us who *we are to be*. With an economy of words and a surplus of meaning, these six great purposes of the church's life compose a genuine Presbyterian mission statement. They set before us six foundational works of the church that express who and what the church is called to be and how the church is called to act. They are not included in the *Book of Order* as taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, but as the calling of each congregation, every presbytery, and the whole General Assembly and all its agencies. Why, then, do congregations, presbyteries, and the General Assembly spend so much time and effort on disconnected, manufactured, and constantly revised visions, mission statements, and goals?

Everything Grows Together

The great ends of the church is not a list of disconnected items, but a holistic vision of the church's life. The church cannot be faithful to the intention of the great ends by emphasizing some while neglecting others. These basic purposes of the church do not allow us to stress proclamation of the gospel while neglecting nurture within the congregation, or to promote social righteousness while failing to guard the truth of Christian doctrine. The great purposes of the church are intimately related to one another; none can be fully understood apart from its relation to each of the others and to the whole.

Yet too many congregations and denominations regularly fall into the practice of limiting their efforts by emphasizing social engagement to the neglect of faithful worship, for example, or stressing doctrine at the expense of joyful proclamation. Lopsided

2. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order 2013–2015* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-1.0304.

priorities are rarely intentional. More often than not, we fall into constricted patterns of church life without noticing what we have lost. We may play to our real or imagined strengths rather than face weaknesses honestly. We may allow some useful structures or successful programs to crowd out other aspects of faithful church life. We simply may become content with the way things are, thereby missing a vision of the way things could and should be. The great ends of the church offers a needed corrective, a comprehensive check-up that provides us with a faithful way to examine our life together.

The interconnectedness of the church's six foundational purposes becomes evident in an intriguing way when they are paired from the inside out.

The great ends of the church offers a needed corrective, a comprehensive check-up that provides us with a faithful way to examine our life together.

- “Maintenance of divine worship” *and* “preservation of the truth.” There is no separation between devotion and integrity, drama and doctrine, beauty and truth. Worship that neglects the truth of the gospel—no matter how engaging, creative, and inspiring it may be—does not maintain the worship of God. Truth without praise and prayer is not the truth about God. The great ends of the church display their unity.
- “Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” *and* “promotion of social righteousness.” There should be no tension between the internal life and outward mission of the church. Focus on the inner life of a congregation or denomination without active engagement in the quest for social justice leads to self-seeking introversion, while focus on social action apart from attention to the internal life of the faith community leads to centrifugal exhaustion. The great ends of the church display their unity.
- “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” *and* “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” Senseless debates about verbal evangelism versus the witness of our lives are put aside when their mutuality becomes evident in the comprehensive design of the great ends. Speaking the gospel is oddly abstract without the witness of Christian life; the witness of Christian life without the gospel narrative is vague and ambiguous. The great ends of the church display their unity.

Bulletins and Banners?

The great ends of the church presents us with a unified vision of the church's purpose, and each of the six aims presents us with a sharp challenge concerning the ways we shape church life. Why, then, are the great ends so often ignored in favor of fabricated congregational and denominational mission statements? Why, when the great ends are used, are they routinely relegated to customary words in Sunday bulletins or artistic symbols on decorative banners? Presbyterians tend to be legalists about *Book of Order* rules and regulations, but the *Book of Order's* more

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theological and ethical affirmations are treated as window dressing, ecclesial ornaments admired and then disregarded.

There are multiple causes for our neglect of these six fundamental purposes of the church's life. Underlying all of them, however, may be their pointed specificity, both individually and as a whole.

- “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” has no room for glib, generalized references to the gospel. This great end specifies that the gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is good news about the *salvation of humankind*. Furthermore, we are challenged to *proclaim* this gospel, not merely to believe it.
- “Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” goes beyond comfortable congregational life to encompass *all* of God's children. Some need shelter from the *dangers* of violence or unemployment, most need nurture *in the faith*, and all need fellowship *in the Spirit* far beyond Sunday coffee hours.
- “Maintenance of divine worship” takes us beyond debates over worship styles—“traditional” or “contemporary”—to the realization that worship is not about us, but about our praise of the one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and our obedience to God's Word.
- “Preservation of the truth” means we are not at liberty to believe whatever we wish to believe, but the truth about God and ourselves must be taught, believed, lived, and sustained.

- “Promotion of social righteousness” makes clear that engaging God’s justice in both church and society is not an optional feature of Christian faith and life, much less an unwelcome intrusion into “spiritual” religion.
- “Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” compels us to examine the character of our individual and corporate Christian life. When the world looks at us, what does it see? Does what it sees reflect God’s new Way in the world, or does it simply mirror the way things already are in the world?

None of this is easy. It is more comfortable for some people, congregations, and even denominations to avoid one or more of these six challenges because they do not conform to existing convictions or preferences. “Promotion of social righteousness” may be dismissed as meddling in politics. “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” may be scorned as fundamentalism that fails to recognize the value of other faiths. We may find comfort in being satisfied with the existing shape of congregational worship or small-group fellowship, and so have no need for bothersome self-examination.

The Great Challenges to the Church

The great ends of the church present us with pointed challenges to our routine ways of thinking about the church’s life, about its faith and its mission. They call us to bold declaration of the gospel, deep spiritual lives, reformed worship, fidelity to the truth, justice in the church and the world, and visible witness to Christ in our personal and ecclesial lives. The great ends also present us with challenging paths toward these purposes:

exhibit!
 promote!
 preserve!
 maintain!
 shelter and nurture!
 proclaim!

The great ends spur us to action. They do not ask us to contemplate the nobility of their aims, but to commit ourselves to move toward their fulfillment.

The great ends spur us to action. They do not ask us to contemplate the nobility of their aims, but to commit ourselves to move toward their fulfillment.

No congregation is perfect or will ever be beyond reproach. No denomination is flawless, and all denominations live in perpetual deficiency. Our inevitable failure to achieve the church's great purposes should not discourage us from striving toward the faithful goals set before us, however. The six great ends are both the horizon toward which we are called to travel and directional signs along the way. They are a road map as well as a destination. They are gifts to us from our forebears, the result of their best thinking about the shape of the new life to which Christ calls us. They come to us as encouragements to our faithful living, not as indictments of our grand and petty failures.

The church's six purposes challenge us, setting out touchstones, beckoning us toward deeper love of God and neighbor. For that reason, they must never become standards we employ to critique others. If we use them to evaluate other congregations or to pass judgment on our denomination, we pervert their intent. Viewing others with contempt, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" (Luke 18:11), is as self-deceiving as it is censorious. The great ends of the church are the unified purposes for all Presbyterian congregations, every presbytery, and all national structures. However, while the whole church is called to fulfill these purposes, their challenge begins with us, where we are. Diverting their light away from us and toward others only succeeds in leaving us in darkness.

Church studies sometimes proceed in an atmosphere of detachment as the "subject" of the study is observed from a distance. As we continue this study of the great ends of the church, we will move beyond detachment to engagement. We may then be able to let these central purposes examine us, helping us discover how they can become aids to the continuing reformation of our church. They call us to renewed ecclesial and personal faithfulness. Our purpose in this study is not merely to learn *about* these central purposes of the church's life, but to understand how to use them as lenses that show us more clearly the realities of our church's life and the possibilities for its ongoing renewal.

Spiritual Practice

On six successive days, meditate for five minutes on the Scripture passage suggested for each of the great ends of the church:

1) proclamation of the gospel: Romans 10:14; 2) shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship: Acts 4:32–35; 3) worship: Psalm 150; 4) truth: John 1:14; 5) righteousness: Amos 5:24; 6) kingdom of heaven: Luke 13:18–19.

Questions for Reflection

If the great ends of the church are familiar to you, how did you learn about them? How were they used? If they are new to you, why do you think you haven't heard about them before?

Which of the six great purposes of the church most challenges you?
Your congregation?

Would the great ends of the church be a suitable mission statement for your congregation? For the PC(USA)?