

SOME BIBLICAL BASES OF



“A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH”

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by William M. Ramsey

Some Biblical Bases of “A Brief Statement of Faith”

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Printed in the U.S.A.

This book is part of the Men's Bible Study series produced through the Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Presbyterian Publishing Corporation
100 Witherspoon Street Louisville, KY 40202-1396
1-800-227-2872
Orders: Ext. 1, Option 1
Curriculum Helpline: Ext. 3
FAX: 502-569-5113

A Brief Statement of Faith

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Introduction

Men's **BIBLE** Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2) We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3) We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4) We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5) We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6) We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7) We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has

been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passage. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

INTRODUCTION

A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

1 *In life and in death we belong to God.*
2 *Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,*
3 *the love of God,*
4 *and the communion of the Holy Spirit,*
5 *we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,*
6 *whom alone we worship and serve.*

7 *We trust in Jesus Christ,*
8 *fully human, fully God.*
9 *Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:*
10 *preaching good news to the poor*
11 *and release to the captives,*
12 *teaching by word and deed*
13 *and blessing the children,*
14 *healing the sick*
15 *and binding up the brokenhearted,*
16 *eating with outcasts,*
17 *forgiving sinners,*
18 *and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.*
19 *Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,*
20 *Jesus was crucified,*
21 *suffering the depths of human pain*
22 *and giving his life for the sins of the world.*
23 *God raised this Jesus from the dead,*
24 *vindicating his sinless life,*
25 *breaking the power of sin and evil,*
26 *delivering us from death to life eternal.*

27 *We trust in God,*
28 *whom Jesus called Abba, Father.*
29 *In sovereign love God created the world good*
30 *and makes everyone equally in God's image,*
31 *male and female, of every race and people,*
32 *to live as one community.*
33 *But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.*
34 *Ignoring God's commandments,*
35 *we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,*
36 *accept lies as truth,*
37 *exploit neighbor and nature,*
38 *and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.*
39 *We deserve God's condemnation.*
40 *Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.*

41 *In everlasting love,*
 42 *the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people*
 43 *to bless all families of the earth.*
 44 *Hearing their cry,*
 45 *God delivered the children of Israel*
 46 *from the house of bondage.*
 47 *Loving us still,*
 48 *God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.*
 49 *Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,*
 50 *like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,*
 51 *God is faithful still.*

52 *We trust in God the Holy Spirit,*
 53 *everywhere the giver and renewer of life.*
 54 *The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,*
 55 *sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,*
 56 *and binds us together with all believers*
 57 *in the one body of Christ, the Church.*
 58 *The same Spirit*
 59 *who inspired the prophets and apostles*
 60 *rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,*
 61 *engages us through the Word proclaimed,*
 62 *claims us in the waters of baptism,*
 63 *feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,*
 64 *and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.*
 65 *In a broken and fearful world*
 66 *the Spirit gives us courage*
 67 *to pray without ceasing,*
 68 *to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,*
 69 *to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,*
 70 *to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,*
 71 *and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.*
 72 *In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,*
 73 *we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks,*
 74 *and to live holy and joyful lives,*
 75 *even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,*
 76 *praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"*
 77 *With believers in every time and place,*
 78 *we rejoice that nothing in life or in death*
 79 *can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

80 *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*
Amen.¹

1 "A Brief Statement of Faith," The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Part 1: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991), 10.1—10.6. Italics added. The *Book of Confessions* allows congregations to sing a version of the Gloria in place of the last line (line 80) of the statement.

Some Values of "A Brief Statement"

A case can be made that "A Brief Statement of Faith" is itself a sign that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the church.

In 1983, after more than a century of division, Presbyterians finally came together to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). There were still theological controversies. Fundamentalists, middle-of-the-roaders, and liberals argued, sometimes bitterly, for different ideas. I confess that I doubted the new denomination could ever produce a statement of our doctrines that would meet with widespread agreement.

Amazingly, "A Brief Statement of Faith" won approval by 90 percent of the presbyteries, and in the final vote carried the General Assembly by a ratio of ten to one. We differ on many things, but if you want to know the basic beliefs on which the Presbyterian Church agrees, "A Brief Statement of Faith" is a good place to start.

More than most denominations, Presbyterians have a tradition of clearly and systematically saying what we believe. "No creed but the Bible!" say some of our sisters and brothers in other churches—that slogan being in itself a kind of creed. We agree that the Bible, not "A Brief Statement of Faith," is our ultimate authority. But if someone asks you what Presbyterians believe, it will not be a practical answer to start quoting at Gen. 1:1 and recite all the way through Rev. 22:21.

Here, then, are some values of having "A Brief Statement of Faith":

1) Defining what a Presbyterian is helps clarify—for ourselves and others—who we are. Half of the adults in our churches grew up in other denominations. (That may include you, and most certainly includes some other men in your study group.) "A Brief Statement of Faith" gives a concise summary of the beliefs that help make one a Presbyterian.

2) "A Brief Statement" helps in teaching. In it young people can study a kind of primer in theology, and new members can learn our emphases.

3) Along with the other creeds and confessions in our *Book of Confessions*, it helps to protect us from having fanatics and heretics in our pulpits and in other positions of leadership. Television reports recently showed a cult leader loudly declaiming how his followers would use their assault weapons to cleanse the nations, "as Jesus cleansed the temple." He probably felt that his views were based on Scripture, but they did not come from Scripture as understood in "A Brief Statement of Faith."

All ministers of the word and other church officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are required to make solemn vows. First they must reaffirm their faith in Christ. Next they must agree that they regard the Bible as "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ." But then they must answer yes to this question:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

Therefore, no matter whom your congregation calls as pastor or to what city you may move, you can expect that your new Presbyterian (U.S.A.) pastor will understand and teach the Scripture in general accord with "A Brief Statement" and other doctrinal standards.

4) "A Brief Statement" is designed for use in worship. One way we express our worship for God is by standing up and saying out loud what we believe. Always printed in short phrases for unison reading, "A Brief Statement of Faith" is a beautiful way of asserting to God and each other our trust in the Lord.

Some Special Characteristics of This Statement

"A Brief Statement" is something new. For many years many Presbyterian congregations have been affirming their faith in their worship using "The Apostles' Creed," and for three centuries "The Westminster Confession of Faith" and its related catechisms served as the only official doctrinal standards for most English-speaking Presbyterians. We have not abandoned those older statements. Indeed, our *Book of Confessions* also includes "The Apostles' Creed"; the ancient "Nicene Creed"; "The Scots Confession"; "The Heidelberg Catechism," dear to the hearts of Europeans of the Reformed tradition; "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," written in 1934 by a group of Germans to protest some claims of Hitler's followers; and "The Confession of 1967." But "A Brief Statement" expresses the faith of American Presbyterians in contemporary language, and it deals with contemporary challenges.

Of course, "A Brief Statement" is not entirely new. Its ideas are as old as the gospel it seeks to summarize. There is probably not a line in it with which the framers

of the earlier creed would now disagree. It is based on the same Bible they loved, and it honors the same Lord. An appendix allows cross-references to the earlier confessions. And "A Brief Statement" has some special values as we face the third millennium.

1) Its first major paragraph is about Jesus Christ. Many other confessions begin with God as Creator, but it is especially through Christ that Christians come to know God. The evidence for God in nature is ambiguous, but through Jesus Christ, as Savior, we can come more clearly to see God's revelation in creation.

2) In the paragraph about Jesus Christ, we recall as basic to our faith the stories of how he proclaimed the kingdom, taught, healed, ate with outcasts, and forgave sinners (lines 10–18). "The Apostles' Creed" simply skips from Jesus' birth to Jesus' death.

3) It affirms our faith in light of challenges undreamed of a century ago. Thus, we confess in lines 37–38 that "we exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care."

4) It makes clear our stand against racism and sexism, affirming with Scripture that God "makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people" (lines 30–31). In this connection, note that it avoids using exclusively masculine language of God, affirming, again with Scripture, that God is like a father and also like a mother (lines 49–50).

5) Originally, "The Westminster Confession of Faith" had no section on the Holy Spirit, but "A Brief Statement" devotes to that Spirit 25 of its 80 lines.

6) In lines 55–60 we affirm that the Spirit rules our faith and life through Scripture, claims us in baptism, and feeds us in the Lord's Supper. "The Apostles' Creed" never mentions either the Bible or the Sacraments, which are so essential in the Reformed tradition.

7) Far more than some earlier creeds, this statement is expressed in the language of worship and of the heart. It does not just make factual statements of truth about God. Instead, four times it uses the words "We trust." And it concludes with us singing the Gloria! None of our other doctrinal standards are so beautifully designed for worship.

The Nature of the Studies in This Guide

The study guide you are now reading is one of a series prepared under the auspices of the Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1995 an introductory study on Job was field-tested by men's groups in seventeen different churches representing various sizes, locations, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. The response was enthusiastic. These studies have been edited in the light of that testing.

Like other studies, "Some Biblical Bases of 'A Brief Statement of Faith'" is intended for seven sixty-minute sessions. It makes no attempt to explore the entire meaning of "A Brief Statement" in so short a time. The overall series is intended to be a study of the Bible, and thus, this guide focuses simply on some Bible passages that illustrate some major ideas in the Statement.

Actually, an appendix to "A Brief Statement" includes more than 650 citations to Scripture, supporting the statement line by line. (The appendix is not an official part of the statement as adopted by the church.) Obviously, seven hours is not enough time to look at even a tenth of these Scripture passages. This study guide will examine only a few passages for each part of "A Brief Statement." You may want, however, to look at the appendix (as found in *The Book of Confessions*) and explore some of the other passages to see how thoroughly biblical "A Brief Statement" is.

While these studies may be used in a variety of settings and groups, they are designed for small groups of men, not more than twelve per group, including one—or preferably, two—leaders. Participants should be seated around a table or in a circle, engaging in free and open discussion for a full hour. Each man in the groups should be asked to promise that he will try to participate in all seven sessions. Blank spaces have been left in this guide for participants to jot down their own answers. Doing this may encourage them to share with others the ideas they have. There are no wrong answers, and each should feel free to say what he thinks.

While the studies of the Men's Bible Study Series may be taken in any order, it is suggested that this one on the biblical bases of the statement be done at the end of the first year of using this resource. It can serve as a kind of summary of the insights found in the others.

Resources To Help in This Study

Fortunately, there are some excellent resources to assist the leaders and the participants in this study. Three are designed specifically to help with "A Brief Statement of Faith."

Introduction Guide to "A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)" is a 27-page, paragraph by-paragraph commentary designed for those wanting to begin study of "A Brief Statement." It and an accompanying video are available from the Office of the General Assembly, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

To Confess the Faith Today is edited by Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglass, two of the authors of "A Brief Statement." It contains seven articles by different writers on different aspects and emphases of the statement. It was published in 1990 by Westminster/John Knox Press as the statement was being submitted to the presbyteries for their vote.

Belonging to God: A Commentary on "A Brief Statement of Faith" (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) is by two of the authors of the statement, William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins. It is a very helpful, 213-page line-by-line exposition.

Christian Doctrine, by Shirley Guthrie, was originally published for study by lay people as part of the Covenant Life Curriculum. Highly readable, it has recently been revised and is available through Westminster John Knox Press.

Basic Christian Doctrine, A Summary of Christian Faith: Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) is by veteran seminary professor John H. Leith. It discusses every major doctrine from the perspective of the Reformed and Calvinistic tradition.

Of course, the basic book is *The Book of Confessions*, Part 1 of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, published by the Office of the General Assembly. It contains not only "A Brief Statement of Faith" but all older confessions that we still recognize as part of our doctrinal heritage. It also includes a two-page introduction to "A Brief Statement" and the lengthy list of scriptural citations. The appendix to "A Brief Statement" contains cross references to the other confessions for easy comparison.

Many good commentaries on the different books of the Bible discuss the various Scripture passages that we will study.

It seems appropriate to end this introduction and to begin this study with the apostolic benediction that begins "A Brief Statement of Faith" and from which it takes its outline:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (lines 2-4, 2 Cor. 13:13).

We Trust in THE TRIUNE GOD

A Life and Death Matter
Line 1

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group. The leader may wish also to review some of the material in the introductory section of this study guide.)

The comic strip "Hagar the Horrible" recently featured a medieval peddler. His wagon advertises his wares: philosophies, ideas, notions, theories, belief systems, and "ologies." Hagar's young son, though puzzled, is inquiring, "What have you got that's good?"¹

Presbyterianism offers a belief system that is based on something so good that "good" is part of its name. We call it the "good news" or "gospel." It is so good, we proclaim, that it is the only thing both to live by and to die by.

We share that gospel with other Christians, of course, but Presbyterians have special ways of presenting it. Tragically, many Presbyterian men have scant knowledge of what our church teaches. A recent survey of mainline church adults,² including Presbyterians, found that though 92 percent claim a strong belief that there is a God, many profess only a foggy notion as to what God may be like. In an older survey many Presbyterians often checked as their answer to some question on theology, "It's a mystery. Only God knows."

For seven weeks we will be studying "A Brief Statement of Faith." This statement is not based on a mass survey of the options of typical Presbyterians. Instead it is based on the Bible as interpreted by selected Presbyterian students of theology. It conforms to centuries of Presbyterian tradition, and it has been studied and in 1991 officially adopted after votes of successive General Assemblies and of the presbyteries. We will study "A Brief Statement of Faith" paragraph-by-paragraph and almost line-by-line, but we are going to do so by focusing on some Bible passages that document from God's word the truth of this most up-to-date confession of faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

In life and in death we belong to God.

We "belong" to God. Read Rom. 8:14-16. A father used to play with his adopted son. "Who do you belong to?" he would ask. Even before the baby could do much talking, he would smile trustingly and roll his big blue eyes up toward Dad.

How is our relationship toward God like that of adopted sons, and how is it different?

One passage to which the framers of "A Brief Statement" especially refer us comes later in Romans 8. Read verses 35-39. Obviously the church to which Paul was writing was expecting persecution to the death, something most of us are unlikely to face. But other miseries test our faith.

Go over Paul's list and then list a few of the challenges that make it most difficult for a man to be a real Christian today.

1 Dik Browne, "Hagar the Horrible" (King Features Syndicate, Inc.), December 21, 1994.

2 Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 44. Based on a study by the Search Institute.

In which kind of challenge do these words of victory mean most to you: _____
 challenges of life, or _____
 the challenge of approaching death? Why?

Grace, Love, Fellowship—Lines 2-4

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.) -

*Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God,
 and the communion of the Holy Spirit . .*

Those words sound familiar. They are part of the "Apostolic Benediction," often pronounced at the end of a worship service. They come from 2 Cor. 13:13, Paul's triune prayer for a troubled congregation. If you glance through "A Brief Statement of Faith" you will see that its authors build this whole confession around those words, following its order. After the first six lines, the introduction, they give a brief summary of what we believe about Jesus Christ (lines 7–26), then about God "whom Jesus called Abba, Father" (lines 27–51), and then about the Holy Spirit (52–76). Note that some of the concluding lines (77–79) bring us again to Rom. 8:38-39, and we close with the triune Gloria.

In 2 Cor. 13:13, Paul presents not so much the mystery of the threefold nature of God as the threefold experience we have with this kind of God. Read that verse and compare experiences now.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

... the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ...

Sometimes we sing "Amazing Grace" with little thought as to what the word "grace" means. Here are a few definitions, synonyms, and words closely related to the Greek word for grace, *charis*.

Check the one that is most surprising to you. Which means most in your experience?

- _____ Joy _____ Gift _____ Charisma
- _____ Always treating us better than we deserve
- _____ Graciousness _____ Attractiveness
- _____ Forgiveness

What is added by this definition: "the undeserved but freely given and powerfully effective favor of Christ, which not only opens the way to faith and new life, but also continues to give the believer the daily help he needs"?³

... the love of God ...

Quote or read John 3:16. As biblical commentaries note, it is remarkable that when the early church looked at the cross, they spoke not simply of the love of Christ but of the love of God.⁴ Why, do you suppose?

... and the communion of the Holy Spirit ...

Here are three of the many ways that the word "communion" reflects our experience. What does each add for you?

- The communion service _____
- Fellowship with other Christians _____
- Partnership (the Bible really does use this word for a business partnership). _____

In what sense, if any, do you think of us as "partners" with other church members and with God's Spirit?

Trust in the Triune God—Lines 5-6

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

... whom alone we worship and serve... we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, ...

"A Brief Statement of Faith" ends with us singing about the triune God, rather than trying to analyze away the mathematical mystery of the Trinity. Lines 2–4 focus on our threefold experience. The rest of this confession is outlined around the threefold nature of God. The one God is really three. God is love—a Father loving a Son and a

3 Floyd V. Filson, "2 Corinthians," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), pp. 424-25.

4 James Reid, *ibid.*

Son loving a Father, bound together by the spirit of love. More light will be shown on that mystery as we go through this threefold statement. Here let us focus on the word "trust." It is God's grace, love, and communion that, the statement reminds us, enables us to trust.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Eph. 2:8—10. A popular heresy proposes that Christianity teaches that if you are good you will be saved and if you are bad you will be lost.

According to this passage, what is wrong with that idea?

A perversion of Paul's view, which became common so early that James had to attack it, is this: It doesn't matter what you do, because we are saved by our "faith," by having a correct opinion. The kind of faith—read: *trust*, not just opinion—that Paul talks about results in what?

Now look through the rest of the "Brief Statement" and note how each section begins with the word "trust." We "belong" to God.

Afterword

A few years ago one theologian caricatured the "creed" of the typical Presbyterian as belief in "God, a kind of Father of us all, who helps those who help themselves, and who blesses America and defends it against godless communism; and in Jesus, who taught men how to find happiness by being nice to each other; and in the church, one of the finest cultural facilities we have in our community."⁵

By contrast, a few years ago a Presbyterian elder visited with a fearful, dying woman. He was able to calm her fears by reciting to her from memory a Presbyterian conviction about death, as stated in Question 37 of the *Shorter Catechism*: "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection." Would it be worth your while to *memorize* the first six lines of "A Brief Statement of Faith"?

Looking Ahead

When Presbyterians think about God they begin with Jesus Christ. For the next session, study lines 7—18, John 1:1—14, and Luke 7:18—23.

⁵ Waldo Beach, *The Christian Life* (Richmond: CLC Press, 1966), p. 12.

two

We Trust in JESUS CHRIST

Who Jesus Christ Is Lines 7—8

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.

Ask a Hindu about how to encounter God, and he may suggest that you assume the lotus position and meditate on the Brahman within your own soul. A Zen Buddhist friend might ask you to sit and contemplate a beautiful flower. A New Age devotee might offer transcendence by using an oddly shaped piece of polished glass. Your Jewish neighbor will point with justifiable joy to the law of God in such books as Deuteronomy.

As a Presbyterian, you can rejoice with each in the various insights they might have. But Presbyterians do not begin by looking within, or at a crystal prism, or even at nature. When Presbyterians think about God we start with a man, with Jesus Christ. This very human Jesus, a real person in a country that you can see featured in 'stories today on CNN, is the window through which we see God, God's self.

He is, we maintain, "fully human," as human as we are. But he is also "fully God." How Jesus can be both is a mystery, but the church has rejected any effort to do away with the mystery by saying that Jesus is in no way less than fully human or fully God. The earliest heresy tried to deny that Jesus was fully human. He was, the Docetics proposed, God's spirit temporarily popped into a human body. By contrast, our Unitarian friends deny that he is fully God. Other heresies attempted to explain him as half one and half the other. Presbyterians join with other orthodox Christians in denying all of these heresies. Like earlier confessions, "A Brief Statement of Faith" makes no attempt to "explain" the mystery; it simply sets safeguards against any effort to water it down. But here are a few of the many ways the Bible itself seeks to answer the question "Who is Jesus?"

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Which of these biblical titles for Jesus means the most to you? Why?

_____ Peter's great confession, "You are the Messiah." Jeremiah and the other prophets had promised that someday the Lord, God's self, would come and rescue God's people. Sometimes they had focused that hope in the promise of a coming king. For months, perhaps years, Peter and other disciples had been with Jesus. Now read Mark 8:27—30 to see what they had discovered.

_____ The Christmas story: Jesus was conceived ... from the Holy Spirit. Review one part of the Christmas story in Matt. 1:18-25.

_____ Jesus as the Son of God. How does Matt. 11:27 present this?

The Bible uses titles for Jesus that had previously been restricted to God, but it is equally insistent that Jesus was completely human. Like Jeremiah and Job, he could feel that God had abandoned him (Mark 15:34). Read Heb. 2:18; 4:15. Jesus was tested or tempted in all things we are tested by.

Which of the following means most to you: that Jesus was tempted—really struggled with—:

- _____ sex?
- _____ being rejected by friends?
- _____ seeing his work apparently fail?
- _____ feeling abandoned by God?
- _____ having a chance to "succeed" using the devil's ways?
- _____ undergoing amazing physical suffering? Why?

The Life that Showed Who Jesus Is—Lines 9-18

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.*

"How would you try to persuade a man who is not a Christian—say a Buddhist or a Muslim or somebody with no religion—that Jesus is the revelation of God?" I asked a professor of religion. "Well, I wouldn't try to argue with him," he replied. "But I would say to him, 'Let's look together at the figure of Jesus as presented in the gospel.'¹ Perhaps that is the best way to strengthen our own faith, too.

Like Jeremiah of old, John the Baptist seemed to have failed in his effort to persuade people to repent, and he was put in jail. His faith wavered. He sent an associate to Jesus. "Are you really the one?" he asked. Read for yourself the story of Jesus' answer in Luke 7:18-23.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How would you reply to a friend who, seeking help, asked you why you believe in Jesus?

Jesus did not give John the Baptist a direct answer to his question. Instead he simply called attention to what he was saying and doing, letting John make up his own mind on the basis of that evidence.

Of all the things Jesus said and did, which two would you pick as the ones that most strengthen your own faith? Why?

Proclamation That Showed Who Jesus Is—Line 9

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

One critic of "The Apostles' Creed" commented, with at least some truth, "All it says about the most important part is a comma!" That is, the creed skips from Jesus' birth to Jesus' death with only a comma in between. "A Brief Statement" does not make that mistake. The Gospels' stories of Jesus' words and deeds are important to our faith.

If asked to summarize the message Jesus proclaimed, how would you reply?

"God so loved the world"

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

Mark summarizes it as "the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). The kingdom (or reign) of God was the heart of Jesus' preaching. Part of Jesus' reply to John was that the "good news" of the kingdom was being preached to the poor. Nearly every parable begins "The kingdom . . . is like . . ." (Matt. 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47, etc.). Jesus taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). And Jesus said that the one thing we must strive for first in life is that kingdom (Matt. 6:33). So, if we can understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom, we will have an important idea of what it means to put our trust in him.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How would you define "the kingdom of God"?

What help does the Lord's Prayer give you in understanding what you are praying for as you pray "Thy kingdom come"?

Jesus proclaimed that kingdom by both word and deed. See how Jesus summarizes his message and mission in Luke 4:16-21. What, if anything, do these verses add to your understanding of the kingdom and what it means to trust in the one who proclaimed and initiated it?

Afterword

Walter Rauschenbusch tells how as a young man he preached a gospel of individual salvation, while working near slums and sweatshops owned by Christian landlords. How could he relate their personal trust to the social concerns they still lacked?

And then the idea of the Kingdom of God offered itself as the real solution for that problem. Here was a religious conception that embraced it all. . . . Was it a matter of personal religion? Why, the Kingdom of God *begins* with that! The powers of the Kingdom of God well up in the individual soul; that is where they are born. . . . Was it a matter of world-wide missions? Why, that is the Kingdom of God, isn't it?—carrying it out to the boundaries of the earth. Was it a matter of getting justice for the working man? Is not justice a part of the Kingdom of God? Does not the Kingdom of God consist simply of this—that God's will shall be done on earth, even as it is, now in heaven? And so, whatever I touched, there was the Kingdom of God.¹

Looking Ahead

The stories of Jesus' life and his proclamation of the kingdom are important to our faith. But next week we move on to something even more crucial, Jesus' saving death and resurrection (lines 19-26).

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, as quoted in *Four Modern Prophets*, by William M. Ramsay (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), p. 14.

three

Trust in His Death AND RESURRECTION

Jesus Was Crucified Lines 19—20

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified.

After a semi-legal lynching, they tortured their Savior to death on the city dump. From Hindu gurus to the New Agers, nobody ever imagined a story like that! Whatever else the skeptic may say about the cross, nobody denies that the cross is historic fact.

Jesus precipitated his execution by standing up against an army of sins. He died because of Judas' greed, the Zealot's trust in violence, the priests' concern to preserve their religious privileges, the Pharisees' injured pride, the soldiers' willingness to do anything for pay, Pilate's fear for his job, the disciples' cowardice, and the mob's manipulated madness. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they screamed, and Pilate knuckled under to their political pressure.

The charges against Jesus were both religious and political. Mark emphasizes how the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, condemned him on the religious charge of blasphemy (Mark 14:53-65). Pilate's concern was political. He read the equivalent of a political poll and feared that his enemies might tell the emperor that Rome's man in Jerusalem was soft on subversives. Read that story in John 19:1-22, and see how this politician caved in.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What made Pilate hand Jesus over for crucifixion?

Pilate was doing what the people said they wanted. In what sense, if any, is that wrong for a politician to do?

John subtly suggests that Jesus, not Pilate nor Pilate's boss in Rome, is really in charge. What ways can you find that John does this?

For the Sins of the World (Our Sins)—Lines 21-22

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

... suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.

The gospel centers on a paradox: *Jesus* was punished for *our* sins. He suffered the wrath of God to win our salvation. We are not used to associating words like "anger" and "punishment" with God. In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards struck the fear of God into the hearts of his hearers with a sermon on "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Today, few seem to believe that God can get angry. One survey indicates that among mainline churches, including the Presbyterian, only 19 percent of adults believe that God punishes.¹ But the

¹ Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 44.

biblical God is never soft on sin. What happened to all those curses about which God warned in Deuteronomy 27? They were never repealed. The gospel says that God—God's self—endured them in the Mediator for whom Job had longed (Job 19:25-27).

How God-in-Christ could suffer for, and thus take away, our sins is a sacred mystery. Before we look at some biblical figures that help us to understand at least a little of this mystery, consider a modern illustration. The great Scottish Presbyterian preacher James Stewart tells of a man whose wife discovered that he had been committing adultery. In her face he saw anger, even rage, shame, grief, frustration, condemnation, and horror, but conquering all-forgiving love. In that moment, the penitent husband later said, he saw in her, more clearly than in any sermon, what God-in-Christ went through for us.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What in the world do you suppose John can mean when he calls Jesus Christ our "advocate," our defense attorney? In what way, if any, do you think Jesus could be compared to Matlock or Perry Mason?

No image can ever be complete. It would be misleading simply to picture God the Father as a judge condemning us and Jesus as our advocate. There is a story that in the early days of the Salvation Army one of its young workers was arrested for violating a law against soliciting funds on the street. The judge tried the case, but as he did so he stood in the prisoner's dock beside the girl. What does that figure add to the symbol of Christ as defense attorney in the heavenly court?

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:2). A lamb might be killed, itself suffering the penalty for an Israelite's sin. Jesus is called "the lamb of God." What does that symbol add beyond the "defense attorney" figure?

Atonement: at-one-moment. In what sense were we separated from our Heavenly Father, and in what sense has the man Jesus brought us back into God's family?

God Raised This Jesus From the Dead—Lines 23-26

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,*

The cross was not the end of the story. God raised Jesus from the dead, rescuing us from sin, death, and Satan. As the order of the Roman Empire was breaking up and kidnapping became all too common, early Christian thinkers built the biblical figure of Christ as the one who ransomed us (Mark 10:45). Christ was pictured as a kind of heavenly Rambo, invading Satan's domain—death and hell—and at Easter rescuing us prisoners of war, crushing Satan and death itself.

Our oldest account of Jesus' resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul begins by citing witnesses who could testify that Jesus really rose. Then he describes how Christ shattered Satan's greatest weapon, death, and thus delivered us. Read about that victory in 1 Cor. 15:20-26.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How reassuring is Paul's evidence that Christ really is alive again? (For this question review briefly 1 Cor. 1:1-8.)

"As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22). Remember that Gen. 3:19 relates death to "Adam's" (humankind's) sin. Here is an analogy to give some perspective to our involvement. We do not say, "The armed forces won the Persian Gulf war." We say, "We won the Persian Gulf war." Like the army, Christ was our representative. What more would you add from this passage about how Christ's resurrection "delivered us from death to life eternal"?

What difference would it make in life now to know that for those who are "in Christ" even death has now been conquered?

Afterword

William Placher and David Willis-Watkins summarize some of the images biblical figures used to describe the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection:

- If you were a slave, someone else could pay for your "redemption" and secure your freedom... .
- If you owed a debt beyond your capacity to pay it, someone else could pay it for you. Our sins against God put us in God's debt in a way that we can never repay. Christ pays the debt on our behalf.
- If you were held hostage by evil forces, and unable to escape, you needed someone who could defeat your captors and free you. We are entrapped by the powers of evil, and Christ takes them on and defeats them.
- If your relationship with God had been damaged, you could restore it by offering a proper sacrifice, by giving God something pure and of value. Christ sacrifices himself on our behalf, and thereby brings us back into fellowship with God.²

Which of these figures means the most to you?

Looking Ahead

When thinking about God, twentieth-century Presbyterians like to begin with Jesus Christ. But inevitably that leads a Bible-believing Christian back to the beginning. So for next time, study lines 27–32 and Genesis 1, asking what the ancient writer wanted us to know about God.

² William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins, *Belonging to God: A Commentary on A Brief Statement Of Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 78-79.

four

We Trust in God CALLED FATHER

Whom Jesus Called Father Lines 27—28, 49—50

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father...
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home.*

Like a typical Presbyterian sermon, "A Brief Statement of Faith" has an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. The introduction, you remember, comes from Paul's "Apostolic Benediction" about "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13). The three points discuss the three "persons" of the triune God. Lines 7–26 were on Jesus Christ. Now lines 27–51 are on our "trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father."

The television and the newspapers and magazines have given much free publicity to the "Jesus Seminar." This group of skeptical scholars—far more skeptical, many of us think, than need be—has announced that, in their view, 82 percent of the sayings the Bible attributes to Jesus, Jesus never said. But even those skeptics agree that he surely must have repeatedly said one thing: Jesus called God "Father." Indeed, Jesus seems to have used for God the Aramaic word *Abba* so often that it was preserved in the Greek-speaking church (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). It may seem almost blasphemous to us, but language scholars say that that Aramaic word expresses intimate relationship, as though Jesus were calling God "Dad." The way he called God "Father" *did* seem blasphemous to his enemies; they decided to kill him for such boldness (John 5:18). In line 50, "A Brief Statement" repeats its picture of God as a loving father: It recalls the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Now we hardly notice when God is called Father. But some protest the new emphasis on the fact that the Bible also speaks of God as like *a mother*. We are used to referring to God as "He," and picturing God as Michelangelo did, as an old man with a beard. When we stop and think about it, however, we know three things: (1) God does not have a human body, male or female. (2) We mortals have to speak of God by using human language and symbols, none of which are perfect. (3) For many of us, the best human symbol we have for the love of God is the love our mothers showed us. So line 49 compares God to a loving mother.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

We call the parable in Luke 15:11–32 "The Prodigal Son." Really, however, its emphasis is on the prodigal's father.

What do you think that parable is saying about the nature of God?

Read Isa. 66:13.

What experience with your mother can you share that makes that verse help you understand more about God?

How would you respond if someone began a prayer, "O God, our Heavenly Mother"? Why?

God Created the World Good—Line 29

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In sovereign love God created the world good.

In 1924 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., reaffirmed previous denunciations of evolution and again did "hereby publish them to the world." The world paid little attention! Some of our sister denominations are still fighting that battle, but not the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Nothing in "A Brief Statement of Faith" would inhibit a scientist from pursuing truth wherever he or she finds it. Presbyterians do not for a moment deny the inspired truth of the stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. But we have come to understand that they were written to tell us something about God, not about science or history. Genesis 1 was not written to fight Darwin, but it does fight! It fights faith in pagan gods, and it proclaims the true God.

To understand Genesis 1, imagine yourself a slave, far from home in Babylon. What Jeremiah had prophesied has now come to pass. Every day your masters taunt you. "Marduk, god of Babylon is lord!" they proclaim. "He created the world like this: His mother—Tiamatchaos—ruled all the gods. But after a bloody fight, our god cut her in two. From her top he made the heavens. From her bottom he formed the earth. Marduk of Babylon is the greatest of the gods." But on Friday nights, by the river, you meet with other Jews and hear a very different story. "There is only one God," your priest chants. "The world that God made is not the product of chaos and battles. It is good, made step-by-step according to plan. Our God does not have to battle to create; our God has only to speak. God does it all for humankind. And it is good!"

But read the story for yourself in Genesis 1.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What does Genesis 1 suggest to you about the nature of God?

Pagans believe in many gods, who often fought among themselves. Many secular Americans also think that the world is chaotic—that it makes no sense. But modern science arose first in the lands where the biblical story of creation was taught.

Why do you suppose that occurred?

Some of our Buddhist neighbors see the world as simply a place of suffering. They say that we must get rid of all desire, especially for material things. Some Christians almost seem to think of pleasure as evil. *But what is the attitude toward things in this world expressed in Gen. 1:31, and what does that imply about life on God's earth?*

Makes Everyone Equally In God's Image—Line 30-32

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

[God] makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.

Everything God made, Genesis tell us repeatedly, is good (1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). One thing, however, was special, the climax of creation: *human beings!* Read Gen. 1:27 and 5:1-2. Notice how the Bible repeats, for emphasis, that we are "in the image of God." And note how each time we are told that both sexes are in that image. Whatever the biological origins of the different races, for Genesis we are all sons of Adam and Eve, that is, we are all kin in the image of God. If we ever look down upon or mistreat another human, we are looking down upon or mistreating the image of God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Obviously Genesis does not mean that we *look* like God. So what do you think the Bible means when it says we are in God's image?

Here are some answers some have given. Which two would you pick? Why?

We can think.

We can make free and moral choices.

We can love.

We can respond and be responsible.

We can know God.

Why, do you suppose, is the "image" repeatedly related to our being male and female?

Perhaps the love of man and woman can mirror the love of God. In love for God and for each other we reflect, or "image," God's love for us. Line 35 says we sometimes violate that image.

How does Col. 1:15 help us understand how God has intended for us to "image" him?

Afterword

Here is a child's letter to God:

Dear God,

Are boys better than girls? I know that you are one but try to be fair.

Sylvia¹

Based on Genesis, how might a Presbyterian father reassure Sylvia?

There are 100,000 million galaxies, some with 100 billion suns. "How is [such a] cosmos structured? As scientists look farther into the universe, they see larger and larger structures. The largest structures that are being observed cannot be explained by any current theory. . . . Cosmologists can now say with some confidence that the universe started out in a very hot and very dense state somewhere between 8 billion and 25 billion years ago, and that it has been expanding outward ever since—the Big Bang in a nutshell. They believe galaxies are strewn around the cosmos not randomly but according to a pattern. . . ."² Do new discoveries of the immensity and age of the cosmos threaten our faith, or do they add to our marveling at the wonder of our creator God?

Looking Ahead

The Creator created a good universe. But something has gone wrong! For next time study lines 33-51, Genesis 3, and Rom. 5:6-21.

¹ As quoted by Clarice J. Martin, in *To Confess the Faith Today*, Jack L. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglass, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 112.

² Michael D. Lemonick and J. Madeleine Nash, "Unraveling the Universe," *Time*, March 6, 1995, pp. 78, 81.

We Sinners Trust in

GOD

We Deserve God's Condemnation—Lines 33—39

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.*

Only half joking, my father used to say, "Sin is a requirement for membership in the Presbyterian Church. You have to be a good fellow to join the Rotary Club. But when you join the Presbyterian Church you have to be a sinner and confess it."

You not only have to admit it, you have to be ashamed of it. Shame is not a popular idea these days. We believe, with good reason, in tolerance and understanding for others. But repentance involves being ashamed of one's own sin. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself?" my mother would tell me when I misbehaved. Not all churches, however, preach shame as an aspect of the Christian's relationship to God. "Feel-good religion" is said to be characteristic of the most "successful" congregations. With good reason, we seek to inculcate in our children not shame, but a healthy self-esteem. But "Whatever Happened to Sin?" a *Newsweek* story demands. Its writers deplore the current moral relativism and urge a return to the concept of shame. Unwed mothers, deadbeat fathers, men who abandon their wives, boys who get teenagers pregnant—society should shame them, the article suggests. But respectable Presbyterians? *Newsweek* quotes a theologian: "We *should* dislike much about ourselves, because there is much about ourselves that is not only profoundly dislikable but odious."¹

"A Brief Statement" devotes six lines (33–38) to a list of sins for which we should feel ashamed. And the paragraph concludes with this frightening self-evaluation, "We deserve God's condemnation."

We were created good, even "in the image of God." What has gone wrong with us? Read what is perhaps the most profoundly true picture of how we continue to misuse our God-given free will: Genesis 3.

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, as quoted in "Whatever Happened to Sin?" *Newsweek*, February 6, 1995, p. 22.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What, according to Gen. 3:1-6, are the ways in which the tempter persuades man and woman to sin?

How does our sin affect our relationship to God (Gen. 3:8–10)?

How do we try to evade blame (3:12–13)?

What are the effects of sin on the marriage relationship (3:16)?

On nature (3:17-18)?

On work (3:17)?

In light of Genesis 3, reread lines 33-39. What ideas can you find in both?

Yet God Acts With . . . Mercy—Lines 40-51

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all the families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal
home,
God is faithful still.

"Yet"—One commentary says that "yet," with which this paragraph begins, is "the greatest word" in the entire "Brief Statement."² "Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem." My mother could tell me, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," without destroying my sense of self-respect as a child of God because she and my

² "Introductory Guide to 'A Brief Statement of Faith'" (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1990), p. 16.

father reared me, their son, in the security of their family of love. Many confessions of faith have focused on the legal figure of God as pardoning judge. "A Brief Statement" makes more use of an equally biblical metaphor: God is like a mother and a father, and God's covenant people are *a family*, secure in God's love.

The second section of "A Brief Statement" is really a kind of quick review of the whole story the Bible tells. God created (Genesis 1). Later God made covenant, a contract with promises, with the family of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17:1-9). When that family, now a whole race, was enslaved in Egypt, God delivered them through Moses (Exodus 12). Now the whole people formally entered into the covenant, accepting as their obligation the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:1-21). But, as Jeremiah pointed out so often, Israel broke its promises and at last had to be disciplined (Jeremiah 52). Nevertheless, in the midst of that tragedy, Jeremiah dreamed that God, who like a father or mother loves us still, would make with us a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).

We Christians *are* ashamed of our sin. But humbly, gratefully, we can "boast": Through that new covenant we have been adopted as sons and daughters into the very family of this loving God (Gal. 4:5-6)!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Review Deut. 7:7-11.

Why did God make a covenant with Israel?

What did this God of the covenant do to keep the covenant promises?

What kind of God is described in these verses?

What other ideas do they include that we have not had space to examine?

What reasons are given for keeping our covenant promises?

How do these verses and ideas make you feel?

From the New Testament, study Gal. 4:4—6. In chapter 3, Paul has recalled the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Under the old law, however, Paul says we were really like slaves, or children under a stern babysitter, ordered to do this and that.

How are we different now?

Jesus called God "Abba." Who else can call God "Father" now?

Go back over the lines quoted above.

How many of their ideas have we found in just the few Bible verses we have looked at?

Afterword

"God acts to redeem us" (buy our freedom). "Nicaea the slave was now free! . . . In a religious formality, the price has been given to the god Apollo, though [actually] to her master Sosibis. The inscription that the archaeologists found at Delphi reads, in part, as follows: 'Apollo the Pythian *bought* from Sosibis of Amphissa, *for freedom*, a female slave, whose name is Nicaea . . . *with a price* of three minae of silver and a half of minae . . . The *price* he has received.' Henceforth Nicaea was a slave to her god, 'bought' by the god for a price. But with respect to all human slavery, she could live free."³ Christ paid that price. Now we are not slaves but sons of God!

The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes what it means to be children of God. Believers "are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon them; receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation."⁴

A very personal word: When I get down on myself, as I often have reason to do, I sometimes repeat to myself this reassurance: I am a child of God! It is hard to beat that!

Looking Ahead

The last major section of "A Brief Statement of Faith" is on our trust in the Holy Spirit. Study lines 52—76 and Rom. 8:1—11.

³ William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 426.

⁴ "The Westminster Confession of Faith," Chapter XIV (Chapter XII in another version), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991), 6.074.

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We Trust in GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

What God the Spirit Does for Us Lines 52—57

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
and binds us together with all believers
In the one body of Christ, the Church.*

Some heretics have mistakenly seen God the Creator as working only in the past, though God is still creating (Rom. 4:17). And some have thought of Christ's work as confined to A.D. 30, though he is continually making intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). But nobody makes the mistake of thinking of the Holy Spirit as working only in the past. Though eternal, of course, the Holy Spirit is God at work in human hearts *here and now*.

There are numerous misunderstandings about the Holy Spirit. That word "Ghost" confuses us. "When I was a girl I was scared of the Holy *Ghost*," a godly woman once confessed to me. "Ghost" implies someone dead, but the Holy Spirit is the giver of *life*. Again, we think of "spirit" as meaning something transparent, vague, the opposite of matter. But in the Bible the word "spirit" means "not the opposite of matter," but "what makes something a person." The Holy Spirit is the person of God living in persons. We too often think of "spiritual" as meaning "other-worldly," but the Holy Spirit is God at work here and now among the flesh-and-blood people in this real, material world

"A Brief Statement" began with Jesus Christ and then moved to God as like a father and mother. Now the third and last major paragraph deals with our trust in God the Holy Spirit. This section begins (lines 52–57) by reminding us, among other things, of what the Holy Spirit does for us. So many gifts are listed in those six lines that no one passage of Scripture describes them all, but read Rom. 8:1–11 for just one brief introduction to what God the Holy Spirit does in our hearts.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What is the Spirit called in Rom. 8:2, and why do you suppose Paul uses that title?

How many times do you find the word "Spirit" in this passage?

How many times do you find the word "life"?

What has the Spirit done for us according to 8:1-2?

What will the Spirit do for us according to 8:11?

What things do you find in Rom. 8:1–11 that are in lines 52–57, and what do these verses and the statement add to each other?

Some Ways the Spirit Reaches Us—Lines 58-64

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.*

The Spirit justifies us, gives us life, sets us free, and binds us together in the church. How can we receive all those gifts?

Acts 8:9–24 tells a funny story. In the days of the first apostles, the Spirit was so obviously at work giving people new life and power that a professional magician named Simon was impressed. He offered to *buy* some of whatever it was that Peter had! Peter had to tell him in no uncertain terms that receiving the Spirit is a matter of the heart, not the pocketbook. In fact, there really isn't anything you can do to guarantee receiving the Spirit. Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind, which the weather channel on my TV can never accurately predict, much less control (John 3:8). Still, there are certain places and situations in which you can place yourself where you are most likely to encounter the Spirit.

Lines 58–64 list some of them: studying the Scripture, hearing your preacher's proclamation of the Word, receiving your Sacraments, and being ministered to by the ministers. It is in the fellowship of the church, the body of Christ, that the New Testament pictures the Spirit as coming upon people.

One classic passage on how the Spirit gives gifts to and through the church is 1 Corinthians 12.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

1 Corinthians 12 involves an extended metaphor—or is it more than metaphor?—in which the church is called "the body of Christ."

What ways do you find Paul suggesting that the church is like a body?

According to 1 Cor. 12:12–13, what two things does the Spirit especially use to bind us together?

A recent survey of adults, including Presbyterians, indicates that many think of the church as quite optional, not a vital necessity.

What does this chapter suggest about the importance of being part of the church?

Can you tell about some time in this church study group when the Holy Spirit has said or done something for you?

What the Spirit Encourages Us to Do—Lines 65-74

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all people's to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of people's long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks,
and to live holy and joyful lives.*

So how can you tell a Spirit-filled person, if you should meet one? Of course, you can't always tell. We are going to get some happy surprises in heaven! But lines 65–74 list some things Spirit-filled people do. It takes courage to do a lot of those things. But the Spirit gives us that courage "in a broken and fearful world."

One of the best-loved passages describing what Spirit-filled people are like—and strive to be more like—is Gal. 5:13-26.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What do you suppose Paul can mean when in the same verse (Gal. 5:13) he says Spirit-filled people are "free" and are "slaves"?

The great theologian Augustine said, "Love God, and do as you please."

How would Gal. 5:14 support or deny that idea?

What man can you tell about who shows the "fruit of the Spirit" listed in Gal. 5:22?

The statement speaks of the Spirit as giving us courage and power.

Which of the tasks to which lines 65–74 calls us seems hardest to you? Why?

Afterword

Here are some answers actually given by some grade-school children when asked, "What are the fruits of the Spirit?"¹

- When you make your bed and pick up your jacket.
- The Lord helping us do our homework.
- You have got to have goodness, faithfulness and self-control. I try to live by this kind of fruit.
- Apples and goodness.

How would you, as a grown man in your situation, answer in your own words? Here is the testimony of one Spirit-filled life: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Looking Ahead

Because of space limitations, we have left until next week lines 75-76, the most joyful words of the paragraph on the Spirit:

*even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"*

The last lines of "A Brief Statement" (77–78) leave us singing, "Glory. . . ." Study, too, Rom. 8:22–39.

¹ The Cumberland Presbyterian, June, 1995, p. 6.

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We Trust in God WITH HOPE AND JOY

"Come, Lord Jesus"—Lines 73—76

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

*We strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"*

WORLD TO END DECEMBER 31, 1999, AT MIDNIGHT—The tabloid at the cash register in the supermarket screamed its headline. Reciting proof—texts from Daniel and Revelation—devout but misguided Christians will be giving us another version of that warning until well past the year A.D. 2000. Several of the armed militia groups, of which we became aware after the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, regard themselves as the Lord's army, preparing to fight Armageddon. They understand the future as a soon-to-be-waged bloody war against the United Nations and certain agencies of the United States Government.

Such people misunderstand the Bible concerning at least two points: (1) Revelation pictures the final battle as won not by humans with assault weapons, but entirely by Christ and his heavenly host. (2) The Bible says that the angels don't know when the end will be; that Christ himself, when on earth, did not know when the end will be; and that we are not supposed to know when the end will be (Matt. 24:36; Acts 1:17).

But those who are fanatical about the return of the Lord perform a service for us: they remind us that we must always be ready. Precisely because we don't know when we may meet the Judge, Jesus warns us, "Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt. 25:13, KJV). *"We strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks . . . as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth"* (lines 73, 75).

"What is the world coming to?" a friend used to sigh. Christians know the answer: God's new heaven and new earth when Christ comes again.

The Bible's most vivid and beautiful picture of the end is in Revelation 21-22. As you read Revelation, however, you must keep this in mind: Heaven is too wonderful for human language. Human language is the only language we have, so we must speak of the end in figures that point above themselves. Right in the beginning of the book, John makes it clear that he is using metaphors (Rev. 1:20). Churches are not literally lampstands, Jesus

does not have a sword literally sticking out of his mouth (1:16), and his eyes are not literally fire (1:14). That is not to say that Revelation's words are not true, but only that the reality is even better and greater than that. So as you read Revelation's account of the end, try to decide what the figures mean, always remembering that God's plan is even bigger than we imagine.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Rev. 21:1-6. The Bible begins with a garden.

Why, do you suppose, does John picture the end as a community, a city?

What would you suggest is meant when the church is compared to a bride?

With at least partial truth, we think of God as now in heaven. Where, according to John, is God going to be in the end (Rev. 21:3)?

Try putting in your own words the meaning of the promises of 21:4.

How does this make you feel? Why?

In light of this passage, why do you suppose the church has so often prayed the prayer of Rev. 22:20 and line 76?

In Life Or In Death—Lines 77-79

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord

In a sense, "A Brief Statement of Faith" now comes full circle, ending where it began. With its first line we affirmed that here and now, "In life and in death we belong to God." We end, looking toward the future, with the faith that "nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God" (lines 78—79, italics added; compare Rom. 8:38—39).

Clearly the writers of "A Brief Statement" have been influenced by one of the most beautiful passages in one of the earliest summaries of Reformed theology. The first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, still one of the standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), asks, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" Here is its answer:

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all

my sins and has completely freed me from the domain of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.¹

Theologians speak of "the perseverance of the saints" or "the security of the believer." We face even death with security because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We, and the Bible, speak of "the end" in two ways. We think of the end of the world, which Revelation says will be the final triumph of Christ and the new heaven and the new earth. But everyone must think also of "the end" individually—of one's own death. Most of us try to avoid thinking about death, of course, and try to cover up its approach. A man may touch up his hair with "Just for Men"—or pour money into the latest treatment to try to save what hair he still has. He may run miles every day, or torture himself with the latest exercise machine to try to keep his body youthful. He may even have an affair with a younger woman in the hope of proving to himself that he is still young. But death still approaches.

The Bible is realistic about death. In a sense, we should fear death, for it is our "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26), and Jesus wept at the death of a friend (John 11:35). We should fight it with physicians and all proper measures for health and safety. But when at last death seems to triumph, we Christians can face it with hope, for Christ has conquered death. Because Christ rose, we will be raised, too.

"A Brief Statement" began with an assertion of trust throughout "life and in death," and in our first session we looked briefly at Romans 8. Read again Rom. 8:31—39 as we think of death and life to come.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How many different kinds of difficulties does Paul list?

¹ *The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563—1963. 400th Anniversary Edition* (United Church Press, 1962), as it appeared in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1991), 4.001.

What might you add to Paul's list?

Why can the Christian face even those things with confidence?

How does the statement from the Heidelberg Catechism, quoted above, reflect Romans 8?

Again, how do those verses from Romans make you feel?

A Brief "Final Exam"

Research shows that reviews help us to learn. So, here are some review questions as we come to the end of this series of studies.

Which ideas in "A Brief Statement" have been most surprising to you?

Which lines in "A Brief Statement" are your favorites? Why?

Which of the passages of Scripture we have studied do you love the most? Why?

Afterword

Presbyterians have a reputation for being cold and rational. "A Brief Statement" is rational and systematic, but it is certainly not cold. Presbyterianism is a religion of the head, but it is also a religion of the heart. And so "A Brief Statement of Faith" ends with its own "Afterword," and it suggests that we may want to sing it. Think back over what we say we believe. What would life be like to really trust in the God that the "Brief Statement" and the Bible describe? And if that does seem as glorious to you as it does to me, then you may want to end this study singing the Gloria Patri:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, World without end. Amen. Amen!

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