

Introduction

Welcome to *Foundations of Faith*. In this eight-session course we will cover the basic building blocks of what we as Christians believe. *Foundations of Faith* explores the Apostles' Creed, one of the primary creeds by which we confess our faith. This course is based on the portion of the *Study Catechism* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that covers the Apostles' Creed. The *Study Catechism* was approved for use as a teaching tool for the church at the 210th General Assembly in June 1998. It provides commentary in question-and-answer form on the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The *Study Catechism* provides us with a distinctively Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of the Christian faith. It gives us a Reformed perspective on a creed that we share in common with both Catholic and Protestant churches.

Group Sessions

The group sessions are divided into three main discussion sections. The first is "What Does the Church Confess?" When we confess our faith we say what we believe publicly, and in so doing we commit our lives to it. In this section of the discussion each week, we will examine what it is that the church confesses in the Apostles' Creed. We will use the *Study Catechism* as a tool for understanding how the Presbyterian Church has interpreted the creed.

The second section is titled "What Do I Think?" The Presbyterian Church has always placed a high priority on having a reflective faith. It is important for the church and for individual believers to reflect upon what it is we believe, and to engage in a critical appropriation of those beliefs rather than a mindless and passive repetition of words we

have been taught. This section of the discussion cultivates a reflective faith. You will have opportunities to think, raise questions, struggle with implications, and make affirmations. Here the *Study Catechism* becomes our guide and conversation partner. The catechism serves as a springboard for serious reflection, criticism, and dialogue. Through the discussion, we hope you will be better able to construct and articulate your theological understanding of the faith we confess.

The third section of the group sessions is “What Does This Mean for Me Today?” Sometimes we think of the Apostles’ Creed as simply a bunch of tired old words that we repeat mindlessly in worship. The truth is that confessing this creed will change the way we live. When we join as members of Christ’s church and together confess the Apostles’ Creed, we commit our lives to the faith we profess. Christian faith is not just an assent to certain truths; it is a way of life. In this section of our discussion we will explore connections between what we believe and who we are and how we live our lives.

The Student Guide

You may use this student guide in the group sessions for ready access to the *Study Catechism* questions and scripture references. It also provides material for you to use at home in preparation for the group sessions. You are invited each week to prepare for the group session through reading, reflection, prayer, and writing in a journal. This work that you do at home in the midst of daily life will make the group sessions more interesting and substantive. In addition, we hope that through these times of reflection and prayer, you will begin to build or strengthen habits of spiritual disciplines. Each of the eight sessions includes the following:

THE *STUDY CATECHISM*

Questions and answers for the next group session are included along with supporting scripture passages. Read through the questions and answers several times as you prepare for the group session.

REFLECTIONS

After reading through the relevant catechism questions for the session, read through the background information given. This section explores the catechism questions and answers in greater depth, explaining the theology and suggesting connections for faith and life.

This information will both fuel your own reflection and provide a richness to the small group discussions in the group session.

KEEPING A JOURNAL

Each session includes instructions for keeping a journal and blank space in which to write. You are invited to read through the catechism questions a second time and choose a sentence or phrase to reflect on throughout the week. In addition, some sessions have a second option for your journal, based on the content of the session. Ideally you will be able to set some time aside for your journal each day and will be able to use both options each week. If, however, time does not allow or you are particularly engaged by one of the journal activities, feel free to choose only one.

If keeping a journal and a time for personal prayer and reflection is a new practice for you, you may find the following suggestions helpful.

1. Try to find a general time that you can set aside each day for fifteen to thirty minutes of prayer and reflection on the catechism questions. This will help to make it a habit and not just something you squeeze in when you have extra time.
2. Think about what is a good time for you. Are you a morning person or a night person? Do you have half an hour just after dinner or before your children wake up in the morning? Look for where you could best add something like this to your life and try it out for a few weeks to see if it works.
3. Pick a place where you can be alone and free from distractions (such as TV, radio, and the telephone).
4. If you find that you are enjoying the writing aspect of your preparation time, you may consider purchasing a notebook to provide you with more writing space for your journal.

SESSION 1

What Is God's Purpose for My Life?

The *Study Catechism*: Questions 1–5

Question 1. What is God's purpose for your life?

God wills that I should live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the love of God, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

2 Cor. 13:13 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Question 2. How do you live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me. I entrust myself completely to his care, giving thanks each day for his wonderful goodness.

1 Cor. 6:19–20 “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.”

Gal. 2:20 “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Ps. 136:1 “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Question 3. How do you live for the love of God?

I love because God first loved me. God loves me in Christ with a love that never ends. Amazed by grace, I no longer live for myself. I live for the Lord who died and rose again, triumphant over death, for my sake. Therefore, I take those

around me to heart, especially those in particular need, knowing that Christ died for them no less than for me.

1 John 4:19 "We love because he first loved us."

2 Cor. 5:15 "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Rom. 12:15–16 "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are."

Question 4. How do you live in the communion of the Holy Spirit?

By the Holy Spirit, I am made one with the Lord Jesus Christ. I am baptized into Christ's body, the church, along with all others who confess him by faith. As a member of this community, I trust in God's Word, share in the Lord's Supper, and turn to God constantly in prayer. As I grow in grace and knowledge, I am led to do the good works that God intends for my life.

1 Cor. 12:27 "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

Gal. 3:27 "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

1 Cor. 6:17, 19 "But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?"

2 Peter 3:18 "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Eph. 2:10 "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Question 5. What does a Christian believe?

All that is promised in the gospel. A summary is found in the Apostles' Creed, which affirms the main content of the Christian faith.

John 20:31 "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Reflections

What does God want me to do with my life? What is God's purpose for my life? What difference does it make that I am a Christian? How is my life different from others who do not know the love of Christ? What does it mean for me to have a relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior?

Our study of the catechism begins at the heart of our questions as Christians. We have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior but are not sure what effect that has on us. The catechism uses the words of the apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 13:14 to respond to the first question: "What is God's purpose for your life?" The response: "God wills that I should live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the love of God, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit."

LIVE BY THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

What does "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" mean? The word *grace* might bring to mind a blessing said at the table, a name such as Grace Kelly, or a graceful dancer. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is something very different and unique. It means that Jesus died for us. The catechism says: "I have been bought with a price. The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me." The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is about sacrifice and love. Unlike things we buy at the store, we do not have to pay for this. It is a gift given by God to each of us. We do not and cannot earn this gift. All we have to do is ask for it and it is ours—freely given. Once we have accepted this gift, we have put ourselves in Christ's hands. "I entrust myself completely to his care." Giving ourselves to someone else involves a lot of risk, but it also brings freedom. Just as a small child trusts a parent to provide care and love, we trust Christ and live a life of gratitude for the gift of grace. The psalmist says it beautifully: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 136:1).

LIVE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

The love of God is an amazing thing. God loves us so much that God gave the only Son that we could live. God's love is seen clearest when the eyes of faith look upon the cross, the symbol of God's power over death. First John says, "We love because God first loved us." God's love is a love that never ends. The biblical story witnesses over and over to the power and constancy of God's love. Even when humankind

continued to sin and turn away from God, God's love endured. There is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In response to that love we live as people who are loved. We want to share God's love with others. We share God's love not only with our friends and neighbors but also with the stranger and the needy.

LIVE IN THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Knowing we would need a constant presence to guide us, God sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to be "God with us" in the world. Through the Holy Spirit we are in constant communion with the Lord Jesus Christ. On the day of Pentecost, in response to the gift of the Holy Spirit, three thousand people were baptized and the church began (Acts 2). We too become part of the body of Christ when we are baptized into communion with the Holy Spirit. After baptism we seek to trust in God's Word by studying and learning more about the Bible. We share together in the Lord's Supper and are strengthened by it. As we grow in our faith we pray to God for help and guidance on the journey.

As Christians living in relationship with God, we become intimately related to all three persons of the Godhead. We entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of our lives. We live for God because God first loved us. We live in daily communion with the Holy Spirit who walks with us daily and guides us.

Keeping a Journal

1. Reread each of the first five questions of the catechism. Choose one sentence or phrase to reflect on for the week. Here are some ideas:
 - The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me.
 - Amazed by grace, I no longer live for myself.
 - I entrust myself completely to his care, giving thanks each day for his wonderful goodness.
 - God loves me in Christ with a love that never ends.
 - I take those around me to heart, especially those in particular need, knowing that Christ died for them no less than for me.

See if you can memorize the sentence or phrase you choose, or at least remember the gist of it. Let this phrase stick with you through the week. Include it in your prayers, think about it while you are in the car, and remember it in the midst of a stressful situation. Look for connections between the phrase you selected and the world around

