
Study Guide for Use with *This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm*

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Basic Assumptions

This study guide is based on several assumptions:

1. *This We Believe* is an invitation to explore the basics of the Christian faith based on the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and the tradition known as Reformed (see n.3 in “Introduction: Forgotten Truth”). It is for people who do not know the story of the Bible and are just beginning, as well as for those who need a refresher course.
2. “Laying the Foundation: Getting the Bible Whole” is an essential first step prior to launching into the eight truths. This chapter should be covered thoroughly even if it takes extra time, because the eight truths grow out of the whole story of the Bible.
3. The book makes claims with which everyone will not agree. You should not get nervous about disagreement but should encourage the class to work through it openly and respectfully.
4. The kind of conversation that *This We Believe* invites sometimes evolves into an opinion-fest. No matter how heartfelt the opinions in your class may be, please recognize that many of them will be without basis (1) in the Bible, (2) in the tradition of the Catholic Church in general, or (3) in the tradition of the Reformed church in particular. It will be helpful, therefore, for you to encourage members of the class to identify and examine the roots of their beliefs. Responses such as “And what do you base that belief on?” or “Where can that be found in the Bible?” or “I wonder if that’s where the Reformed tradition

historically has come out on that matter” are helpful ways of encouraging people to see their beliefs *in light of something larger than themselves*, thus nudging the class toward a theological anchor.

5. Theological conversation is open-ended. That is, we should recognize the fact that none of us, including the author of *This We Believe*, has yet spoken or ever will speak the last word on any theological subject. This sort of discussion is a lifelong journey, and hopefully none of us will end where we began.
6. Because theological conversation is open-ended, members of the class need to feel the freedom to express themselves openly, knowing that the other members will not hold them forever to what they say in any given discussion. *Mutual trust*, therefore, is an essential ingredient of the kind of dialogue that this book invites. Nurturing an environment of trust will be one of your most important goals as a leader.

A Suggested Timeline

Each class should proceed at its own rate of speed, allowing for individual needs. Laying a biblical and theological foundation takes time, and the degree to which such a foundation is already in place will determine, in part, how much time should be spent on each chapter. At any rate, this study should not be rushed. For example, dealing with the issues identified in Assumption #4 above can be extremely time-consuming, and people need time to go back to the Bible, to think and rethink, and to grow together.

One approach would be to take one week for each chapter, and this may be possible for those who are already accustomed to this kind of theological inquiry. Most classes, however, will need more time. One suggested timeline is to study *This We Believe* over the course of nineteen sessions by devoting one week to the Introduction and two weeks to each additional chapter.

A word of caution: The most fruitful discussions will take place if members of the class will read each chapter prior to the discussion. One reality that you should recognize, however, is that this often (perhaps usually) will not happen, so each session needs to begin in a way that attempts to bring everyone on board with the specific material at hand. Each member of the class should have a copy of the

book and be encouraged to read it, but you should begin each discussion with an overview of the chapter before the class. Otherwise, an open-ended opinion-fest will inevitably result.

The Centrality of the Bible in Theological Exploration

It will be helpful to model the centrality of the Bible in any discussion about theological truth. Therefore,

1. Ask members of the class to bring their Bibles with them.
2. Include references to the Bible at the start of each class session.
3. Take time in class to read suggested Bible passages, so that the class doesn't just talk *about* the Bible but actually reads the Bible.
4. Make it clear how your personal beliefs grow out of your understanding of the Bible.

The Relationship between Bible, Tradition, and Experience

The role of personal experience in the discernment of truth is often hotly debated in today's church. One of the underlying assumptions of the Reformed tradition is that personal experience is a significant part of interpreting the Bible and, for this reason, *This We Believe* often refers to personal experience—that of the author as well as the experience of others. It is, after all, within the realm of personal experience that our faith in Christ becomes flesh and blood reality. All biblical interpretation is to some degree contextual. That is, the message we hear in scripture is inevitably shaped, in part, by the context of the interpreting community. It is impossible, not to mention undesirable, to separate our hearing of the gospel from our life experiences. Yet one of the basic assumptions inherent in the Reformed tradition is that personal experience is never a decisive trump card in the discernment of truth. Reformed Christians have believed that scripture, tradition, and experience inform each other, but they have insisted that subjective experience does not stand on an equal footing with scripture and tradition, and neither are scripture and tradition peers. Scripture is authoritative in a way that tradition

and experience are not. As discussed at length in Truth 6, Reformed Christians believe that the written words of scripture become, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the word of God. As such, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to [us]” (to quote one of the ordination vows taken by ministers, elders, and deacons in the Presbyterian Church). Tradition also carries the weight of authority, but not the same authority as the Bible. It would be helpful for the class to clarify the relationship between scripture and tradition. (See the Karl Barth quote on pages 123–24 of *This We Believe* for one helpful way of clarifying this relationship.)

While human experience is a significant player on the field of discerning the truth, the greater objectivity of scripture and tradition are sometimes a corrective to subjective experience. The ideal situation is to think of *This We Believe* as an invitation to dialogue between all three—scripture, tradition, and experience—realizing, however, that they are not equal voices in the discussion. It might be helpful to probe the operative assumptions concerning the relationship between scripture, tradition, and experience in your class.

Introduction

Consider covering the following in your class discussion:

1. You might begin by asking your class if they have personally experienced the biblical illiteracy and theological amnesia described in the Introduction. If so, what are the signs of it, and what do they see as its effects on the church?
2. Next, you could focus on the “whys” and “wherefores” of Bible study. *This We Believe* is written from the conviction that learning the story of the Bible connects us to the living Jesus Christ, who empowers us to love God with our whole lives and the neighbor as the self. We study the Bible not to master a set of facts or a body of information but to be led in faithful service to God. Bible study is, therefore, properly understood as a divine encounter in which God speaks to us and shapes the people we are always in the process of becoming. For this reason, one of the basic assumptions of *This We Believe* is that faith, learning, and service are intertwined. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. says it succinctly:

Educated Christians . . . need to “know their Bible” in order to lead a life that fits in with the purposes of God. . . . The point of all this learning is to prepare to add one’s own contribution to the supreme reformation project, which is God’s restoration of all things that have been corrupted by evil (Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God’s World* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002], xii).

3. You might also ask the class to discuss their reaction to the comments about special-interest groups on pages 2–3.
4. Another fruitful conversation concerns the difference between tradition and traditionalism discussed on pages 7–9. In particular, ask the class to discuss the quote from Jaroslav Pelikan/John Leith at the top of page 8. Then consider the following:
 - Why does the word “tradition” evoke such negative reactions in our culture?
 - This quotation from Douglas John Hall is also worth chewing on: “Tradition is not a static theory, a great deposit of inert material. . . . Tradition . . . involves not only what is handed over but also those to whom it is handed. Tradition is a living thing because its being received . . . always entails discovery, surprise, nuance, interrogation and (above all) struggle” (John Douglas Hall, *Professing the Faith*, as quoted in *The Christian Century*, July 31–August 13, 2002), 3.

Laying the Foundation: Getting the Bible Whole

If the members of your class are in any sense typical of many Presbyterians, some of them will not have put all the pieces of the biblical story together into a cohesive whole at any time in their lives. This will be an opportunity for them to do so. Here is an approach that may work for your group.

1. Begin by reading Deuteronomy 6:4–9. What would it look like in twenty-first-century America to follow the imperatives of this text? Point out the connection between the Deuteronomy passage and Psalm 145:4. How are the families in your congregation lauding God’s works from generation to generation?
2. If the class has not already read the synopsis of the biblical story on pages 12–27, it will be your job to digest these pages

and, in your own words, tell the story to your class. Then consider raising such questions as these:

- Were there any surprises in the story? Anything brand new for you? Anything not there that you expected to be there?
 - What parts of the story speak most powerfully to you?
 - At what point does the story make you feel challenged in your faith?
 - Are there parts of the story that simply don't make sense to you? Ask the class to list the parts that need further explanation or study, and approach your pastor or Christian educator about helping in those areas.
3. Invite the class to discuss whether or not they understand the Bible as *their personal story*. Hopefully, this will be an opportunity for the members of your class to expand their understanding of the nature and character of scripture.

For your own background study, consider this statement from John Leith: “To be a Christian is to have Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos; Paul, Peter, James, and John; Augustine, Calvin, and Barth as one’s [ancestors] in the faith,” so that one’s life story is not primarily a matter of biological heritage, but of spiritual heritage given through a common memory. “The people of God,” Leith continues, “have always been a society based not on blood but on historical experiences. . . .” (John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, rev. ed. [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981], 26–27).

In a similar vein, Old Testament scholar John Bright suggests:

The existence of Israel as a people thus rested in the memory of a common experience as handed down ultimately by those who participated in it, who were the nucleus of Israel. Although we cannot control the details of the Biblical narrative, it is unquestionably based in history. There is no reason whatever to doubt that Hebrew slaves had escaped in a remarkable manner from Egypt (and under the leadership of Moses!) and that they interpreted their deliverance as the gracious intervention of Yahweh, the “new” God in whose name Moses had come to them. There is also no objective reason to doubt that these same people then moved to Sinai, where they entered into covenant with Yahweh to be his people. With that, a new society was founded where none had been before, a society not based in blood, but in historical experience and moral decision. (As quoted by John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, 27.)

Modern people are plagued today by a predisposition to live in the present and forget about the past. This analogy drawn by H. Richard Niebuhr from our national history is likewise helpful:

When [people] enter into a new community they not only share the present life of their new companions but also adopt as their own the past history of their fellows. So immigrants do not become true members of the American community until they have learned to call the Pilgrims and the [people] of 1776 their [ancestors] and to regard the torment of the Civil War as somehow their own. Where common memory is lacking, where [people] do not share in the same past there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed common memory must be created. . . . But by the aid of such provincial memories only partial pasts can be appropriated and only limited human communities can be formed. To Christians the revelatory moment is not only something they can all remember as having happened in their common past, be they Hebrews or Greeks, slaves or free, Europeans or Africans or Americans or Asiatics, medieval [people] or modern. It becomes an occasion for appropriating as their own the past of all human groups. Through Jesus Christ Christians of all races recognize the Hebrews as their [ancestors]; they build into their lives as Englishmen or as Americans, as Italians or Germans, the memories of Abraham's loyalty, of Moses' heroic leadership, of prophetic denunciations and comfortings. All that has happened to the strange and wandering people of God becomes a part of their own past (as quoted by John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, 27).

Are there ways to use these insights from Bright and Niebuhr to help your class members understand what is at stake in the Bible as *common memory*? For example, are they able to say with Deuteronomy 6:5, "A wandering Aramean was *my* ancestor"?

Truth 1: God Is in Charge

A good way to begin a discussion of this chapter is to read aloud Isaiah 40:21–31, Romans 8:31–39, and Revelation 21:1–5a.

1. Background to the Isaiah passage: The Israelites are in exile in Babylon. (It might be helpful to return to "Laying the Foundation," pages 23–24, to locate the Babylonian captivity in the

context of the whole story.) In approximately 587 B.C., the Babylonians marched into Jerusalem, ransacked the city, destroyed the temple, and literally began deporting the Israelites to Babylon. They were now cut off from the promised land, separated from their sacred past, and displaced in the rubble of history. The exile was clearly understood as God's punishment for their sins. So picture in your mind the weak and weary exiles weeping bitter tears of regret. Imagine their desolation and shattered hopes. This is the historical context in which Isaiah prophesies the unlikely word that exile is about to end, that the exiles will soon be on their way back home, and that, in fact, God's warfare with Israel is over! Now imagine how you might have felt hearing that prophecy in the midst of intense personal and national despair. We can almost hear the Israelites taunting the prophet: "Sure, exile is almost over. That's why we're so full of despair! God's warfare is over. That's why life hurts so much!" Yet Isaiah answers with a word of God's sovereignty: *It might feel as though the Babylonians are in charge, but it is not so: God is in charge! Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.*

2. Background to the Romans passage: Paul also is facing the despair of life that sometimes feels all-consuming. Leading up to this passage, his focus has been the trials and tribulations that human beings face in their journey through life. Using the language of "bondage to decay" and "suffering," Paul says that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. . ." (see 8:21–23). But now he draws this section to a close by asking, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" Paul then tries to make a list of all the life experiences that feel like they separate us from God. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." The sovereign God finally enfolds all creation in divine love.
3. Background to the Revelation passage: Picture the scene. It's near the end of the first century and the Christians are being fed to the lions. The future is dark with clouds of despair, and

onto this landscape of human sorrow comes the most amazing promise of God: The destiny toward which all human history is moving is a new heaven and a new earth where there is no more death and no more tears. The sovereign God will make it so.

These are the themes that punctuate this chapter. Before discussion begins, it will help if you, as leader, have these themes clearly in mind.

In addition, ask the class to discuss the following themes covered in the chapter:

- The danger of confusing God's power with fatalism or brute force (pages 31–33).
- The difference between divine power and human power (pages 33–34).
- The sovereignty of God as the sovereignty of love (pages 35–37). In this regard, it will be crucial to help the class see a clear connection between the sovereignty of God and the person of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we tend to think of God's sovereignty as an abstract philosophical concept rather than in terms of a living relationship with God. Invite the class to reflect on the fact that we know the sovereignty of God because of the way it is revealed in Jesus Christ.
- Take some time to discuss the section on page 35 concerning the Christian faith as *revealed* faith, and weigh that against our culture's preoccupation with the subjectivity of human experience (i.e., the mantra "Everything I need can be found inside myself").
- Ask the class to react to the quote from William Sloan Coffin on pages 37–38.
- Another fruitful discussion concerns the affirmation at the bottom of page 38: "Because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no horror so great that God cannot be at work in it. There is no terror that God cannot bend to God's good purposes." Ask the class: Do you really believe this? Why or why not? Along these lines, read aloud and discuss the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 45:1–15 and 50:15–21. (Before doing so, make sure that the class knows what happens in the beginning of the Joseph story. If necessary, go back to Genesis 37 and retell the story in your own words.)

Truth 2: God Calls Us to Be a Holy People

The ideas in this chapter are probably among the most difficult for modern readers. Part of the task is to demystify the term “election” so that your study group sees it not in terms of arbitrary choices of God, but in terms of a living, flesh-and-blood relationship with God.

It would be best to begin once again with scripture. Read aloud the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–9 and the call of Moses in Exodus 3:1–4:17. In advance of class, look up the references to Abraham, Sarah, and Moses in Hebrews 11, and point out the way that the New Testament holds up these ancestors in faith as role models for all generations to come. Save a discussion of the texts until later. Simply read them now, so that these scenes from the Bible are clearly in mind as the dialogue progresses.

Next, help the class see the distinction between the doctrines of predestination and providence (pages 47–48). These two doctrines are frequently confused with each other, but predestination has to do with the destiny toward which one’s life is moving through the faithfulness of God, and providence concerns itself with God’s faithful provision for our daily lives.

Many people today (Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians alike) have heard of John Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination as explained on page 47. Similarly, people are often totally confused about what it means, or they put the worst possible spin on it and “blame” the Presbyterians with it. Don’t assume, however, that everyone in your class understands Calvin’s notion of predestination. Explain it and, if possible, check out Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from your church library and read further.

It is especially critical that the class understand that Calvin intended the doctrine of predestination as a *comfort*. While we may have a hard time finding any comfort in it, our criticism at least needs to begin with an awareness of what Calvin intended. Discuss the second and third paragraphs on page 48 in this regard. While we may articulate our understanding of election in a variety of ways, the central affirmation is this: *If God is truly sovereign, then salvation is not up for grabs. If God is, in fact, all-powerful, then we humans are free to abandon the relentless treadmill of trying to earn enough favor with God that we’ll be rewarded at heaven’s gate. If God is in control, then divine power and love are working together even now to shape our personal destinies, as well as the destiny of all creation.*

Next, spend some time talking about the quote from Karl Barth on page 49. Ask the class what they think is at stake in claiming salvation first and foremost as a matter of *God's* initiative. In this part of the discussion, it will be important to lay to rest any suspicion that the doctrine of election means that human beings do not have a choice to make. As John Leith points out, choosing God is a very human act indeed, but one that is rooted in divine purpose. This is an important conversation because we live in a culture that teaches us that life is all about us, and that we are in control of our destinies. The purpose of this part of Truth 2 is not to denigrate or deny the value and significance of human beings making a choice for God, but to set our human choice to love and serve God in its biblical perspective. Personal choice figures prominently in scripture. For example, when the prophet Isaiah was called by God, he had a choice to make, and his choice was “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8b). Joshua reminded the twelve tribes of Israel as they were about to settle in the promised land that life in Canaan would not be easy. The landscape would be littered with a plethora of gods, and they would constantly be deciding for or against God. So he told them: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). And our Lord said, “If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow” (Mark 8:34b). Indeed, human volition plays a role—an important role. But here’s the rub: Human volition does not play the key roll. Our choice is a choice with a lowercase “c.” God’s choice is a Choice with a capital “C.” It is God’s capital “C” Choice that makes our lowercase “c” choice possible. My decision to follow Jesus Christ is rooted in the fact that *the* decision had already been made, and it was God’s decision to love me in cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With these thoughts in mind, discuss the call of Abraham and Sarah, as well as the call of Moses. Some questions to consider:

1. What do these Bible stories tell us about God?
2. What do they say about trust?
3. What can we learn from the call of Moses about excuse-making?
4. Do you believe that God’s call is irresistible? Did Moses really have a choice? What about Abraham and Sarah?

Next, ask the class to discuss “Jesus Christ and God’s Electing Grace” on pages 58–59. Read aloud the short quote from the Second Helvetic Confession at the bottom of page 58, and discuss what this means.

Bring the discussion of Truth 2 to a close by addressing the wideness of God's mercy as expressed on pages 61–62. Questions to consider:

1. Why do you think people enjoy talking about “who's in” and “who's out” in the kingdom of God? And why does this debate often dominate our conversation about election?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the quotation from Karl Barth on page 62? What about the quotation from the Second Helvetic Confession?

Truth 3: Jesus Christ Reveals God's Love

We all hunger for forgiveness. Even if we don't use the words “sin” and “forgiveness,” one of the basic experiences that all human beings hold in common is a sense of alienation both from God and from other human beings. This is the quest of the little child in the first paragraph of the chapter. We all need to feel loved and forgiven, and we all hunger for the peace that comes from knowing that our past failures do not have to define our future.

A helpful way to begin this class session might be as follows:

1. Ask the class to brainstorm by describing all the things in life that stand as a barrier to experiencing a sense of oneness with God. You might hold off on using the word “sin” at this point, because the word itself sometimes hinders a free flow of ideas. In essence, you are asking the class to define sin even before you use the word. Simply go to the blackboard or easel and write down all the barriers that keep us from experiencing the love of God.
2. Indicate that they have just, in their own words, laid out the subject matter for this chapter. They will have in essence described the human dilemma into which Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost.

Next, point out that the class has just offered a variety of descriptions of sin. Now would be a good time to have a discussion about our uneasiness with the concept of sin. Consider the following:

1. Ask the class whether or not their own experience resonates with the illustrations on pages 64 and 65. Why or why not?
2. Discuss the questions, “Where does our discomfort with sin come from?” Are there links to the values of American culture?
3. Call the class’s attention to Romans 5:10 and 11:28 (and their surrounding contexts). Ask them to discuss what they think Paul means when he describes us as enemies of God?
4. Now ask your class to reflect on the T. S. Eliot quote at the bottom of page 65. One of the essentials of a healthy life is a sense of self-worth. But is there a point at which the desire to “think well of ourselves” leads to alienation from God and each other?

Now would be a good time to read aloud the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:4–3:24. After doing so, ask your class to reflect on the extent to which this story is like looking into a mirror. Does this help them understand the doctrine of original sin, as described particularly in the last paragraph on page 69? Why or why not? Before leaving this story, notice how God’s long-suffering nature is already being revealed. Adam and Eve are indeed sent out in the thorns and thistles of the world beyond Eden, but not without divine protection. God personally makes clothes to protect them from the harsh realities of the life they are now entering.

Reading aloud the story of David and Bathsheba is guaranteed to spice up your class. Indeed, it is one of the most graphic soap operas in the Bible. Ask the class to react to and discuss the prophet Nathan’s blunt confrontation of David that leads to David’s spontaneous acknowledgment of his sin. In an amazing way, David was willing to face up to the very worst of the humanity inside him. Ask the class if we also are this willing. Or are we more resistant?

Another fruitful discussion might revolve around the lavish forgiveness of God given in the face of David’s confession. After David’s sin is forgiven, the child born of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba dies, suggesting that forgiveness does not waive the natural consequences of human rebellion. What does the class make of the tension in this statement?

Suggestions for discussing the remainder of the chapter include:

1. Sometimes people think of sin as all the little things they do that are wrong. One of the things this chapter is driving at,

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- however, is helping folks understand sin as a condition. In fact, sin is the human predicament in which all human beings share, and pages 72–76 attempt to describe this predicament. Ask the class to respond to these various definitions from a personal perspective. Which ones are they able to identify with?
2. What about the personal reflection on page 77? Does your class think he has overstated the case? Why or why not?
 3. The next part of the chapter deals with the redemption that is ours in Jesus Christ. Ask the class to define redemption in their own words. Specifically, what do they understand Christ has redeemed them *from*, and what is the purpose of their redemption in Christ?
 4. You might also ask them to discuss the various images of atonement described on pages 78–80. Which ones are most helpful in enabling members of the class to relate to the substance of atonement?
 5. Before ending discussion of this chapter, read 1 Corinthians 15:51–58, and discuss the meaning of the resurrection as God’s eternal victory over sin and death. If death has indeed been swallowed up in victory, what difference does it make in our homes and marriages, in parent-child relations, in ethics in the workplace, in facing tragedies like 9/11, and in dealing with the threat of biological and chemical warfare? In other words, how does our redemption reshape the way we view God, our own lives, the world around us, and the future? You might end the discussion of this chapter by reading aloud the Karl Barth quote on page 83.

Truth 4: God’s Love Is Not for Sale

This chapter presents some of the most difficult material for people to own for themselves. In the “self-made” mentality of American culture, we prefer to believe that we are in charge of our own destinies. Good things happen to us because we are industrious and productive and because we make good choices. It is true, of course, that God calls us to industry and productivity, and much of the gospel deals with making choices that are appropriate to disciples of Jesus Christ. But we lose our biblical compass the moment we draw the conclusion that a relationship with God is possible because we made

the “right” choice. The reality of sin (as discussed in the last chapter) means that we are totally unable to choose God on our own steam. In my experience, many people in the church find this notion unthinkable. Impossible to choose God? Isn’t that why I’m saved—because I recognized my sinfulness and repented and had the good sense to invite God into my life? And the answer to that question is an unqualified, emphatic “No!” Salvation is God’s act of free grace. It is in no way, shape, or form the result of anything we human beings want, think, say, or do. The gospel of Jesus Christ throws out every attempt at self-justification. Approaching this chapter could include one or more of the following:

1. Invite the class to react to the quotation from Douglas John Hall at the bottom of page 87. What does it mean that we are beggars before God, *as much so at the end as at the beginning*? Does the class see ways in which we “turn faith itself into the stuff that will elevate [us] above the beggarly condition,” thereby making faith a work? Then, if time permits, you could discuss the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard as discussed on pages 90–91, concluding with the Robert Farrar Capon quote.
2. In order to get at the issues that have been raised so far in this chapter, lead the class in a discussion of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism as described on pages 91–92. It is easy for us to read Shirley Guthrie’s description of semi-Pelagianism and see ourselves written all over it. Ask the class to deal with this. But beware! Presbyterian pews and pulpits have their fair share of semi-Pelagians.
3. Ask the class to place in conversation semi-Pelagianism and the William Temple quote at the bottom of page 93.
4. Finally, bring the discussion to a close by reading and discussing the “empty vessel” concept of Calvin and Barth on page 94.

Truth 5: God Gives New Life

Now we come to the Christian’s response of gratitude for the forgiveness so freely given to us in Jesus Christ. In our culture, all too often, the forgiveness of God (often referred to as “getting saved”) is

seen as an end rather than a beginning. But nothing could be further from the truth. As a way of kicking off the discussion, consider the following:

1. What does your class make of the composite letter drawn from several third-century letters from Roman parents described on page 97?
2. What is their reaction to the Søren Kierkegaard story on page 97? Ask them to articulate some of the ways that the gospel rearranges the values and priorities in our lives.
3. What are the class's opinions about the quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on page 99: "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes"?

One of John Calvin's primary ways of talking about the life of discipleship is in terms of self-denial. In today's world, self-denial is not a popular theme, yet the New Testament returns to it again and again. Interestingly, Calvin's treatment of self-denial picks up the positive tone of the New Testament. Instead of being a negative word about low self-esteem, it is the most positive of all words concerning the believer's union with Christ. Perhaps you'll find the following suggestions helpful:

1. Read aloud and discuss the scripture texts discussed on page 100: Eph. 4:22–24; Rom. 6:6–8; Col. 3:9–10.
2. Have a conversation with your class about the difference between cheap and costly grace (Bonhoeffer) on page 101, and the call to surrender our all to God as articulated by C. S. Lewis on the same page.
3. Based on your study thus far, go to the blackboard and make a list of the ways in which your group can conceive of self-denial in healthy, positive terms.

In popular religious culture, it is commonly thought that the Christian faith is all about "getting saved" so we'll have some chips to cash in when we arrive at the Pearly Gates. Likewise, confessing the lordship of Jesus Christ is like holding unto an eternal insurance policy that pays out in spades when the time comes. The Reformed tradition, however, follows scripture in saying that salvation is a beginning, not an end in itself, and that, beyond the moment of

saying “Yes” to God, one’s whole life is to be directed to the glory and service of God. “Getting saved,” if you want to use that language, is about serving God’s purposes in all of life, not having your backside covered when the saints go marching in. Ask the class to discuss this concept, and to contrast it with the message commonly heard in popular religious culture.

If time permits, you might also

1. Discuss the quotation on page 103 from Cornelius Plantinga Jr.
2. Ask the class to discuss the wounds referred to on pages 104–5. What is the positive thrust of these wounds?

Before moving to “Lazarus and Discipleship,” lead a discussion of the Christian freedom of faith working through love. What does it mean to be so full of love that one is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the beloved?

The question of affluence is a thorny one in most of our congregations. To be sure, all Presbyterians are not wealthy. Yet even those of us in the middle, the truth be told, have far more than our fair share of the goods of this world. What claims does the gospel make on the possessions of those who travel the affluent corridors of American society? This is one of the direct ramifications of the doctrine of sanctification. Read the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31, and discuss the various guises of Lazarus on pages 108–9.

Bring the discussion of this chapter to a close by discussing gratitude as a major fruit of the forgiven life. Someone has said that gratitude is perhaps the surest sign of a forgiven life. Luther’s words on page 111 would be an excellent way to end this discussion.

Truth 6: God Is Revealed in the Bible

One way to begin discussion of this chapter is to make a list of all the words or phrases that come to mind when someone says the word “Bible.” Then ask members of the class to discuss why certain words or phrases on the list are significant to them. Next:

1. Ask your class what it means for them personally to place their lives under the *authority* of scripture. That is, in what sense is scripture authoritative?

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2. Discuss the seven claims at the top of page 115. Does the list overstate the case? Understate the case? Why or why not?

The next three sections (“Scripture as Divine Revelation,” “Word and Spirit,” and “Jesus Christ, the Living Word”) contain foundational concepts for Reformed Christians. One way to focus the discussion is to ask the class how they tend to view the Bible. Consider placing before them a short true-false questionnaire. After they have completed it individually, invite them to share and discuss their various responses. Such a questionnaire might include such statements as these:

True or False?

- ___ The Bible is primarily a human book that shows how people have experienced God in various times, places, and cultures.
- ___ Much of what we read in the Bible is culture-bound and, therefore, is not universally applicable.
- ___ The Bible was written by the hand of God and is literally the word of God.
- ___ The Bible is mainly a deep well of divine wisdom on how to navigate the turbulent storms of life.
- ___ The Bible is chiefly a guidebook, showing us how to make the most out of life.
- ___ The Bible is a book of rules that keep us on track and show us what God expects of us.
- ___ The Bible is an instrument of divine revelation, revealing who God is and who God calls us to be.
- ___ The main purpose of the Bible is to show us how to love others.
- ___ As the written word of God, the Bible’s primary function is to reveal Jesus Christ, the living word of God.
- ___ The words printed on the pages of the Bible are not in and of themselves the word of God; rather, they *become* the word of God by the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit.
- ___ God does not speak uniquely in scripture; after all, divine wisdom comes in many forms and is found in many places.
- ___ The Bible is written primarily to individuals, and I am free to interpret it without undue influence from anybody else.

An honest discussion about these statements could take an entire class session.

Beyond these general views of what the Bible is, one of the overarching concepts of this chapter is learning to read the Bible in community. One of the impediments we face today is that modern people often think that their questions and agendas are definitive. The first step in biblical interpretation, however, is attempting to connect with the ancient community that produced the text, initially by oral tradition, and later in written form. The Confession of 1967 reminds us that “[t]he Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of [people], conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding” (9.29). In addition to reading the texts of the Bible, the members of your class will be helped by commentaries written by scholars who are equipped to help us listen for the voice of the ancient community speaking. Ask your pastor or Christian educator to provide you with a bibliography of commentaries written specifically for laypersons and make it available to your class.

One way to engage the class in discussion about how this works in practical terms is to use the example of Genesis 1 and 2 as presented on pages 120–21. Are we willing to lay aside our own agendas long enough to attempt hearing the ancient voices of our forebears?

For many people, especially those who have come from other traditions, the idea of “listening to the confessions” will be brand new. They may not know, for example, what we mean by “confessions,” so it would be helpful to make copies of the *Book of Confessions* (the *Study Edition* is especially good) available to those in your class who want one. Before leaving this chapter, lead the class through a brief overview of our confessions and explain why we are a creedal church. If needed, ask your pastor or Christian educator to help with this explanation.

One of the most vulnerable places in the church today is that of listening to each other—especially those with whom we disagree. One approach would be to read Ephesians 4:1–16 and discuss what Paul means by “speaking the truth in love.” To speak the truth in love assumes a relationship of mutual forbearance and respect. Given such a relationship, what is the responsibility of the listener?

Finally, consider wrapping up this chapter by:

1. Pointing out that one of the foundational aspects of Reformed biblical interpretation is that scripture interprets itself;
2. Reading aloud the quote from John Calvin on page 127, and discuss the degree to which members of your class have found this to be true; and
3. Focusing on the practical aspects of biblical interpretation. The Bible is not finally a matter of head knowledge, but of faithful living. One of the preliminary principles in the *Book of Order* is that “truth is in order to goodness” (G–1.0304). You might read this entire paragraph from the *Book of Order* and discuss what it means.

Truth 7: We Are the Church Together

Begin by reading aloud the first twenty-one verses of Acts 2. Then choose which of these themes would best kick-off a discussion of this chapter:

1. The nature of what happened when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciple community was radical. The combination of wind and fire introduces an image of the uncontrollable nature of the Holy Spirit. Ask the class to ponder the question: To what extent does the life of most Presbyterian congregations reflect the untamable Spirit of God?
2. The account of Peter proclaiming the crucified and resurrected Christ in the streets of Jerusalem is a huge surprise, given the fact that Peter is the very one who denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. The gift of the Holy Spirit does indeed give birth to recreated life. Discuss the ways in which the members of your class have personally experienced it.
3. Søren Kierkegaard’s portrait of the church (pages 132–33) stands in stark contrast to the portrait of the church’s birth in Acts 2. Ask the class to discuss this contrast and to verbalize specific ways in which they see in today’s church characteristics of both portraits. How does the contemporary church resemble a community blown into the world like wind and fire? How does it resemble a flock of grounded geese that have lost

their sense of destiny? Do the coffee spoons of T. S. Eliot's Prufrock accurately describe the church as you know it?

Next, invite the class to consider the point made on page 134 concerning the distinction of the church from all other organizations. Encourage your class members to grapple the question of whether or not they, in fact, believe that the church is utterly different from the Lions Club or Rotary or Kiwanis? What about when it comes to stewardship? How does the service club mentality perpetuate the idea of religion *à la carte*?

Few concepts are more central to the Bible than that of "covenant." Explore with the class the various expressions of covenant found in scripture (cf. pages 135–36).

It might also be helpful to spend some time discussing the nurturing, maternal aspect of the church. It is often assumed today that the church is an entirely optional commitment, and that people can be Christian with or without it; it's all a matter of personal preference. Discuss with the class the implications of Calvin's view of the church as mother found on page 137. He suggests that the church as mother is indispensable in providing the nourishment we need to live and grow and thrive as people of God. Do the members of your class agree or disagree?

Another challenge in this chapter is addressing the notion of individual gifts for ministry. Members of the church often feel that their particular gifts aren't as needed as the gifts of others, or that they don't even have gifts needed in the ministry of the church. Before you leave this chapter, why not challenge the members of your class to think about specific gifts that God has given them that could make a difference in the church's ministry? If your class is small enough and its members know each other well, you could even go around the room and ask the class to name the gifts they see in each person. This is sometimes an eye-opening and even empowering experience for people to hear that others see them as gifted human beings whose resources are needed in the church's worship and work.

At some point during your discussion of this chapter, invite the class to reflect aloud on the ways in which the fellowship of the Christian community has made a positive difference in their lives. Perhaps it was a time of personal crisis or some other significant moment in their lives. Use the example of the woman from the Shenandoah Valley on pages 141–42 to invite your class to share their own

stories of meaning and hope from their experience in the Christian community.

One of the most difficult parts of the church's calling is embodying the idea of corporate or collective servanthood. Many people have no trouble seeing themselves as *individuals* sent out into the world to live as God's people, yet the church also has a *collective calling* to live as a servant of Christ in its community and beyond. It might be helpful to ask your class to envision ways in which your particular congregation could more faithfully fulfill this calling.

Spending some time discussing the section on "Word and Sacrament" would be a good way to review what your class members already believe about baptism and Holy Communion, as well as to discuss some new thoughts about the sacraments. Consider:

1. Making a list on the blackboard of all the images that come to mind with each sacrament; and
2. Inviting people to engage one another concerning why they believe as they do. If needed, ask your pastor or Christian educator for theological resources to help with this section.

We come finally to a discussion of the Holy Catholic Church. For people who have been Presbyterian for a long time, this will not be a new idea, but this concept goes against the grain of popular religion in America today. On many fronts, there is an increasing tribalism that separates Christians of various traditions. This is a great opportunity to help your class affirm the catholic (universal) tradition of which we Presbyterians are one part.

Truth 8: We Serve God with Heart *and* Mind

This final chapter takes up one of the bedrock convictions of the Reformed tradition: the life of the mind in the service of Jesus Christ. One entry into the discussion would be to remind your class of the great distance between God and our finite understanding as explained on page 147. Next:

1. Ask your class members what they think about theological boundaries. Does the Christian tradition have them? Is Thomas Oden correct when he says that being the church

- today “is like trying to have a baseball game with no rules, no umpire, and no connection with historic baseball” (page 148)?
2. Turn to page 149 and get someone to read aloud the Christopher Seitz quote, and then ask the class to respond. Get them to chew on the question: To what degree do you feel able “to make a robust, intelligent accounting of the faith we hold” and how can the church help to nurture this ability?
 3. Read aloud the quote from Thomas F. Torrance on page 150 and ask the class to discuss it. In particular, do they agree or disagree with the last sentence of the quote.

The life of the mind is often difficult and painstaking, requiring a combination of commitment and tenacity. Ask the class to discuss Torrance’s illustration on page 151 concerning the transformation of Rudolf Serkin’s hands into those of a gifted pianist. Are we willing to commit ourselves to restructuring our inner selves in this way? On page 153, Torrance is quoted as saying that “[t]he transformation of the human mind and its renewal through assimilation to the mind of Christ is something that has to go on throughout the whole of our life—it is a never-ending discipleship in repentant rethinking as we take up the cross and follow Christ.” Encourage your class to have a frank discussion of the following:

1. In your experience of today’s church, are we truly committed to the transformation and renewal of the human mind through assimilation to the mind of Christ? If so, what are the signs of it? If not, why is this not the case?
2. How open are we to the fact that divine revelation conflicts sharply with the structure of our natural reason? John Donne has taught us to pray, “Batter my heart, three person’d God,” but how much battering of our hearts do we really desire?

Postscript: Looking Toward the Future

As you bring the study of *This We Believe* to a close, ask the class to discuss what they see as the difference between success and faithfulness in the life of the church. Then consider ending with the hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.”