

# *Union in Christ*

—a six-session study guide—  
designed for adult education  
in the local church

by: Dennis & Trevecca Okholm

based on

“UNION IN CHRIST: A Declaration for the Church”

## **UNION IN CHRIST: A Declaration for the Church**

*"He is before all things and in Him all things hold together" Colossians 1:17*

With the witness of Scripture and the Church through the ages we declare:

### **I. JESUS CHRIST IS THE GRACIOUS MISSION OF GOD TO THE WORLD AND FOR THE WORLD. HE IS EMMANUEL AND SAVIOR,**

One with the Father,  
God incarnate as Mary's son,  
Lord of all,  
The truly human one.

His coming transforms everything.  
His Lordship casts down every idolatrous claim to authority.  
His incarnation discloses the only path to God.  
His life shows what it means to be human.  
His atoning death reveals the depth of God's love for sinners.  
His bodily resurrection shatters the powers of sin and death.

### **II. THE HOLY SPIRIT JOINS US TO JESUS CHRIST BY GRACE ALONE, UNITING OUR LIFE WITH HIS THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH.**

In the proclamation of the Word, the Spirit calls us to repentance, builds up and renews our life in Christ, strengthens our faith, empowers our service, gladdens our hearts, and transforms our lives more fully into the image of Christ.

We turn away from forms of Church life that ignore the need for repentance, that discount the transforming power of the Gospel, or that fail to pray, hope and strive for a life that is pleasing to God.

In Baptism and conversion the Spirit engrafts us into Christ, establishing the Church's unity and binding us to one another in Him.

We turn away from forms of Church life that seek unity in theological pluralism, relativism or syncretism.

In the Lord's Supper the Spirit nurtures and nourishes our participation in Christ and our communion with one another in Him.

We turn away from forms of Church life that allow human divisions of race, gender, nationality, or economic class to mar the Eucharistic fellowship, as though in Christ there were still walls of separation dividing the human family.

### **III. ENGRAFTED INTO JESUS CHRIST WE PARTICIPATE THROUGH FAITH IN HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER.**

By our union with Christ we participate in His righteousness before God, even as He becomes the bearer of our sin.

We turn away from any claim to stand before God apart from Christ's own righteous obedience, manifest in His life and sacrifice for our sake on the cross.

By our union with Christ we participate in His knowledge of the Father, given to us as the gift of faith through the unique and authoritative witness of the Old and New Testaments.

We turn away from forms of church life that discount the authority of Scripture or claim knowledge of God that is contrary to the full testimony of Scripture as interpreted by the Holy Spirit working in and through the community of faith across time.

By our union with Christ we participate in His love of the Father, manifest in His obedience "even unto death on the cross."

We turn away from any supposed love of God that is manifest apart from a continual longing for and striving after that loving obedience which Christ offers to God on our behalf.

IV. THOUGH OBSCURED BY OUR SIN, OUR UNION WITH CHRIST CAUSES HIS LIFE TO SHINE FORTH IN OUR LIVES.

This transformation of our lives into the image of Christ is a work of the Holy Spirit begun in this life as a sign and promise of its completion in the life to come.

By our union with Christ our lives participate in the holiness of the One who fulfilled the Law of God on our behalf..

We turn away from forms of Church life that ignore Christ's call to a life of holiness, or that seek to pit Law and Gospel against one another as if both were not expressions of the one Word of God.

By our union with Christ we participate in His obedience. In these times of moral and sexual confusion we affirm the consistent teaching of Scripture that calls us to chastity outside of marriage and faithfulness within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

We turn away from forms of Church life that fail to pray for and strive after a rightly ordered sexuality as the gracious gift of a loving god, offered to us in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We also turn away from forms of Church life that fail to forgive and restore those who repent of sexual and other sins.

V. AS THE BODY OF CHRIST THE CHURCH HAS HER LIFE IN CHRIST.

By our union with Christ the Church binds together believers in every time and place.

We turn away from forms of Church life that identify the true Church only with particular styles of worship, polity, or institutional structure. We also turn away from forms of Church life that ignore the witness of those who have gone before us.

By our union with Christ the Church is called out into particular communities of worship and mission.

We turn away from forms of Church life that see the work of the local congregation as sufficient unto itself, as if it were not a local representative of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church called together by the power of the Spirit in every age and time until our Lord returns.

By our union with Christ our lives participate in God's mission to the world: to uphold the value of every human life, to make disciples of all peoples, to establish Christ's justice and peace in all creation, and to secure that visible oneness in Christ that is the promised inheritance of every believer.

We turn away from forms of Church life that fail to bear witness in word and deed to Christ's compassion and peace, and the Gospel of salvation.

By our union with Christ the Church participates in Christ's resurrected life and awaits in hope the future that God has prepared for her. Even so come quickly, Lord Jesus!

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

## NOTES on this study

The following curriculum, designed by Trevecca Okholm (Certified Educator, PC/USA) and Dennis Okholm, (Professor of Theology, Wheaton College/ ordained PC/USA) is based on: Union in Christ: a Declaration for the Church: A Commentary with Questions for Study and Reflection – 1999 by Andrew Purves and Mark Achtemeier.

This study has been designed for a six session Christian education context. It may easily be stretched into more sessions.

It has been designed for use by pastors, elders, educators and lay leaders in the church. It is “user-friendly” in hopes that it will readily be incorporated into adult education programs of local churches. Facilitation will be enhanced if the leader reads the resources recommended below for this study.

Each session is designed to take between 1 and 1-1/2 hours of class time, with the assumption that participants will spend time each week in preparation for the session.

Resources needed for this curriculum:

- A Bible for each participant.
- A copy of Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church for each participant.
- A copy of the PC/USA Book of Confessions. (optional)
- *For the leader:* at least one of the following books (cited in the bibliography):  
Christian Doctrine (Guthrie)  
Introduction to the Reformed Faith (Leith)  
Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation (Noll)  
Welcome to the Family (Okholm/Phillips)  
Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions (Rogers)

Each session consists of:

*Coming Together Time* (10 minutes)

*Lesson Time* (20 - 30 minutes)

*Small Group Time* (10 - 20 minutes)

*Closing Time* (10 minutes)

plus each session also has a *To Do At Home* section for mid-session use.

Definitions taken from:

Elwell, Walter, ed. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. Baker Books. 1996.

Merriam - Webster. Collegiate Dictionary. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. 1994.

All Bible references and notes taken from NRSV or NIV (Life Application Bible).

## Session #1: Introduction: Why a declaration for the church?

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the first session is to:

- Present the conditions of the church that brought about the need for a new declaration
- Explain the distinctions of a declaration vs. a confession
- Analyze the central theme of this declaration

During this session participants will:

- Get acquainted
- Read through the declaration
- Discuss (in small groups) the impact of a declaration or confession on personal & corporate faith formation

### COMING TOGETHER

Spend time with introductions if participants do not already know one another. Begin by throwing out the following questions for response by anyone in the group:

- By whom or by what have you been most influenced in your faith development?
- What or who influenced you to become a Presbyterian?
- Which written documents, if any, do you consult most often to be advised of the content of the faith?

### THE LESSON

Begin by reading through the Declaration out loud.

- Discuss the differences between a Confession and a Declaration.  
(A *confession* seeks to present a comprehensive summary of all the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, whereas a *declaration* seeks only to lift up certain elements of the faith in order to speak to a particular situation.)
- Which parts of a comprehensive summary are not present in this declaration?
- What elements of the faith does the declaration lift up?
- Present the particular situations of the church and culture which have precipitated the writing of a declaration in the past.
- BARMEN DECLARATION = speaks to totalitarianism and idolatry facing the church in Nazi Germany.
- CONFESSION OF 1967 = speaks to racial and social justice confronting the American church of the 1960s.
- UNION IN CHRIST = speaks to the challenges facing the Presbyterian church in our current culture.

THE FOLLOWING CHALLENGES THAT CALLED FOR A NEW DECLARATION WILL BE RAISED FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION IN THIS COURSE OF STUDY. Briefly touch on them in this first session to encourage participants to pre-read the Declaration:

- the challenge of *Christology*
  - What do we think about Jesus? Does it matter?
  - Who is Jesus? How has this question been answered through the centuries by the early church disciples, by Calvin and those in the Reformed tradition?
  - How does the culture view Christ?
- the challenge of *discipleship*
  - What does it mean to commit oneself to the teachings and values revealed in Christ?
  - What is the cost of following Christ? What are the rewards?
  - Does the church transform culture or does the culture transform the church?
  - How do we translate our beliefs into meaningful living and witness?
  - When and how do we know if we should make compromises as we seek to be faithful to Christ's authority?
- the challenge of *authority*
  - What is biblical authority and what impact does it have on the church in our current setting?
  - How do we understand the authority of Scripture?
  - In what ways do we live obediently and respectfully before God?
  - How do we separate opinion from authority?
- the challenge of *mission*
  - In what ways does the church continue Christ's mission to seek and save the lost?
  - What is the biblical call to "mission"? What is the mission of the church?
  - What is the relationship between social justice and evangelism?
- the challenge of *Church unity*
  - What is the foundation of our life together?
  - What does it mean to have UNION *IN* CHRIST?
  - Is "united Presbyterian" an oxymoron?
  - How do we *maintain* the unity created by the Spirit?

(Taken from a study guide on the declaration by DICK MILLER for Massanutten Presbyterian Church, Virginia – 9/99)

<----- COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT ----->

## Small group discussion

Divide into small groups of 4-6. Give each group a handout with the following questions for group reflection:

- Consider the difference between a declaration and a confession. How does each benefit the church? In what way does/can a declaration (or confession) encourage or discourage *your* personal theological formation?
- Read Matthew 16:13-20. Why is Christ's question: "Who do you say that I am?" so relevant to life today? What other questions are crucial today?

## To Do at Home this Week

Read and reflect on preface, introduction and section I of "Union in Christ" for next session.

*(Extra credit! Read Ephesians 4)*

## Closing

Close with a prayer and sing or recite in unison the words to the great hymn of faith, "God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand" (#262– The Presbyterian Hymnal) or "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" (#379 – The Presbyterian Hymnal)

### DEFINITIONS

**THEOLOGY** = from Greek words *theos* meaning God, and *logos* referring to an explanation or an account. Theology is one's understanding of God. Everyone has some thesis regarding God, even if it is just that God does not exist. So everyone has a theology, whether acknowledged or not.

**DECLARATION** = a document seeking to explore implications of a *single* theological theme for the contemporary church.

**CONFESSION** = a document seeking to present a comprehensive summary of all the essential doctrines of Christian faith.

**CHRISTOLOGY** = the study of Christ.

**DISCIPLESHIP** = following Jesus Christ, to whom one has made a personal commitment; the process of becoming Christlike.

**AUTHORITY** = warrant, license, or authorization to perform. The question of authority is a fundamental issue facing every person, especially the believer. Every person has an authority in life that he or she submits to as a subordinate, not by constraint but by conviction.

**MISSION** = the divine activity of sending intermediaries to speak or do God's will so that divine purposes for judgment or redemption are fulfilled.

**UNITY** = to be related to each other as one. The religious experience of the risen Christ indwelling the believer's heart by the Spirit. Being "in Christ" (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

## Session #2: Confessing Jesus Christ

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the second session is to:

- Reflect on what it means for us to be part of a communion of faith linked with the historical church
- Explore how and why Jesus Christ is God's mission to the church
- Consider how confessing Jesus Christ is linked to Christian maturity.

In preparation for the session participants will:

- read the introduction & section 1 and be prepared to discuss
- read Ephesians 4

### COMING TOGETHER

Open discussion by asking participants what comes to mind when they hear the words: "tradition"; "Jesus Christ"; "Christian maturity."

### THE LESSON

The Declaration begins with the affirmation that it stands in continuity with Scripture and church tradition.

*Q: Why is it important to begin a church Declaration acknowledging Scripture and our tradition? Is tradition a good thing?*

"Tradition" simply means "that which is passed on or handed over." (It comes from the same root as the word "traitor"—someone who hands over something or someone to the enemy!) We refer to tradition each time we celebrate communion, as we recite the words of institution in I Corinthians 11, where Paul writes, "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you . . . ." (v. 23)

So tradition can be a good thing. It gives us perspective on the present. It helps us determine who and where we are as members of a specific community with a history. In fact, when we become members of a community, such as the United States or the Presbyterian Church (USA), we appropriate the history of that community as our own history. The people and events that have shaped it become our memories.

But we must avoid fixation. As John Leith says in Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: "Tradition is the living faith of dead people. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people." He refers to "traditioning the faith." Sometimes we express this by saying we are "a reformed church always being reformed." We are relatively bound to our past and relatively free to express our faith in new and changing circumstances. That is precisely what this Declaration is all about. (Review the difference between a declaration and a confession.)

To say that we are a church always being reformed requires a qualifier: being reformed by what? We insist that all tradition is subordinate to Jesus Christ—the Word of God in flesh

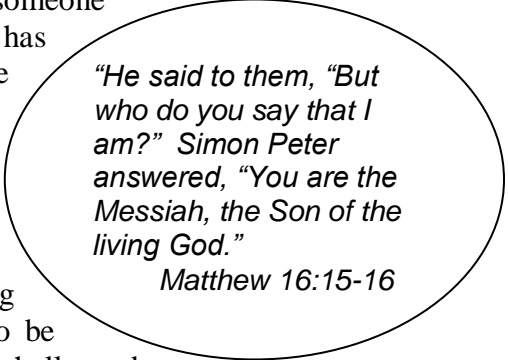
made known to us in Scripture, the Word of God written. That is why the first section of this declaration focuses on Christ.

*Q: How do we know who Jesus Christ is? Does it matter what we think of him?*

In the last lesson we referred to the questions Jesus put to his disciples in Matthew 16: "Who do people say that I am?" and, more importantly, "Who do you say that I am?"

The question of identity matters. In the age of the internet we have become increasingly concerned with protecting our identity. If someone attributes to us debts or criminal behavior that has nothing to do with who we really are, we might be mistaken for someone we are not. In fact, if our identity was stolen or changed by someone else in this manner, it might have disastrous consequences for others who are related to us.

The same is true when it comes to the identity of Jesus Christ. If we get his identity wrong it will harm God's human creatures who need to be properly related to him. There are those who have challenged the church's confession, such as the "Jesus Seminar" whose participants disagree on exactly who Jesus was, but agree that he was not God, that he was not crucified for our sins, and that he was not raised bodily from the dead. In a sense, these academics have stolen Jesus' identity. And it has disastrous consequences for the present and future well-being of all of us. (At this point, you might want to read something like James Edwards' article on the Jesus Seminar, cited in the bibliography.)



*"He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

*Matthew 16:15-16*

The Declaration identifies Jesus Christ as "the gracious mission of God to the world and for the world." There is no other like him; he is one of a kind. It goes on to declare who Christ is in consort with Scripture and the church through the ages. As John Calvin put it, Jesus comes to us "clothed in Scripture." In this light we answer Jesus' question in Matthew 16 by confessing that he is fully God (see John 1:1 and the Nicene Creed in the Book of Confessions) and fully human (see John 1:14 and the Definition of Chalcedon, an ecumenical creed from the fifth century).

*Q: Why is it important to begin with agreement on the identity of Christ, particularly in a culture in which it seems "anything goes"?*

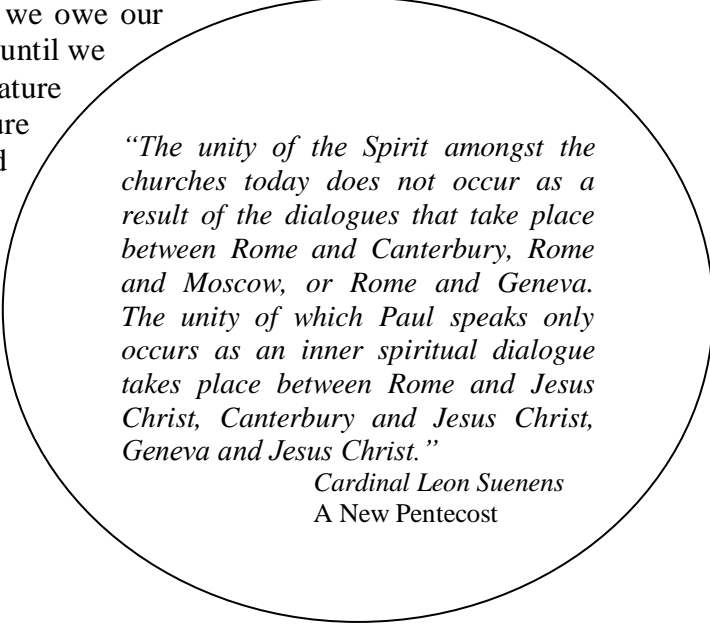
The Declaration insists that when God the Son became incarnate in human flesh he changed everything. He is the only way to God, making clear what is only dimly or distortedly known about God in other religions and in creation (John 1:14-18). By his life he shows us what it means to be truly human (Colossians 3:10-11). By his death he demonstrates the depths of God's love for us (John 3:16). And by his resurrection he was established as the authority over everything in creation (Philippians 2:9-11).

In Ephesians 4 (particularly verse 13) Paul describes the goal of the church's maturity as a growth into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. In its essential beliefs—especially about the identity of Christ—the church is to be coming together. The unity of the faith and maturity in the body of Christ go together. We have different backgrounds, different vocations, different experiences, different preferences about food and clothing and political candidates. But the one thing we are supposed to be coming together on is our answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

But Paul insists that this is not just a knowledge about Jesus; it is a unity of the knowledge of the Son of God. Ultimately, we will never be one just because we recite the

church's creeds together nor because we are connected with one another by our church government. We will only become one as we all get involved with the same person—Jesus Christ—in the deepest possible fellowship.

In verse 14 Paul says that this kind of maturity of the church will keep us from being blown around by every "wind of doctrine" or by crafty folks. Paul might have been referring to the winds of the latest fads in spirituality, or the latest "hot" personality in popular religious circles, or the crucial issue that fills up the ecclesiastical docket. Paul is telling us to stay the course—to maintain the essential beliefs of the Christian faith and to keep our lives in vital touch with the only one to whom we owe our allegiance—Jesus Christ. We are to do this until we attain the maturity measured by "the full stature of Christ." In other words, we are to measure our Christian maturity by nothing other and nothing less than Jesus Christ.



*“The unity of the Spirit amongst the churches today does not occur as a result of the dialogues that take place between Rome and Canterbury, Rome and Moscow, or Rome and Geneva. The unity of which Paul speaks only occurs as an inner spiritual dialogue takes place between Rome and Jesus Christ, Canterbury and Jesus Christ, Geneva and Jesus Christ.”*

*Cardinal Leon Suenens  
A New Pentecost*

<----- COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT ----->

*ILLUSTRATION: Perhaps you recall the time in your education when you were learning good penmanship, struggling to get those letters just right. There was usually a pattern to copy at the top of the page. That was the standard by which you were to judge the quality of your attempts. But if your experience was typical, you found that as you progressed down the page and copied the line immediately above—which happened to be your last attempt—your eyes were taken off the perfect pattern or standard and the copies of the copies devolved further from the original. That is precisely Paul’s point in Ephesians 4. Don’t focus on someone else as you aim toward mature Christian adulthood. Don’t accept a lesser standard. Make Christ the one by whom you measure your Christian maturity. Make him your standard. Make him your aim. You will find yourself aiming at perfection.*

## Small group discussion

The Declaration begins with an affirmation of historical connectedness to emphasize that it is not inventing a new theology. Reflect on what it means for us to be part of a communion of faith linked with the Church through the ages.

- The phrase “Jesus Christ is the gracious mission of God...”states in a few words the meaning of the incarnation and the atonement. Discuss this idea. How does it help clarify the content of Christian faith and living?
- How can we help each other achieve the Christian maturity Paul discusses in Eph. 4?  
*(if you have more class time, refer to remaining discussion questions at the end of section I)*

## DEFINITIONS

**INCARNATION** = literally, “in-fleshing.” God the Son comes to us in the flesh when he became human as Mary’s son.

**ATONEMENT** = God’s provision for humankind to be reunited to God in a harmonious relation – to be “at-one” with God through the person and work of Christ.

## To do at home this week

-- The assertion is that the whole of Christian faith and life flows from our union in Christ. In this light, journal for your own edification (not to be turned in nor discussed in class next week) how you understand the meaning of union in Christ. How does that compare with a biblical understanding? Look at some of the following Pauline uses of “in Christ”:

- Romans 3:24, 6:11, 23; 8:1-2; 12:5; 16:9-10 • 1 Corinthians. 1:2, 4, 30; 15:22
  - 2 Corinthians 2:14; 5:17,19 • Galatians 2:4; 3:26,28; 5:6 • Ephesians 2:13
- (There are many more such usages. See also “in him” and “in the Lord” in Colossians and elsewhere in the writings of Paul)

--Read section II of the Declaration and be prepared to discuss in class.

## Closing

Close with a prayer and sing or recite in unison the words to this great hymn of faith: “Come, Great God of All the Ages” (#132 The Presbyterian Hymnal, can be sung to the tune of Hyfydol, see #2)

## Session #3: The Work of the Trinity in the Life of the Church

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this third session is to:

- Reflect on and discuss the work of the Holy Spirit in accomplishing our union with Christ
- Introduce the first three of the eleven false forms of Christian discipleship identified in the Declaration (the statements beginning with “we turn away from. . .”)
- Discuss and gain a better understanding of theological pluralism, relativism and syncretism.

In preparation for the session participants will:

- read section II and be prepared to discuss

### COMING TOGETHER

Open with an application question such as:

- What is faith and how have you seen evidence of faith in action in your own life experiences?
- How has the Holy Spirit interacted or intervened in your life of faith to draw you closer to ‘Christ-likeness’?”

### THE LESSON

As we discussed at the end of the previous session, it is one thing to know about Jesus and another to know Jesus. Both are important. The church has always insisted that both the faith we believe (faith's object) and the faith by which we believe (the act of faith) are important.

*ILLUSTRATION: If I see a frozen pond and walk on it with the faith to believe that it will hold me up, I will get very wet if in fact the ice is thin. All the faith in the world can not make true what is not true. Sometimes an intense faith in the wrong thing can even be disastrous, as it would be in the case of my bold confidence in very thin ice. My act of faith does not itself change the object of my faith. On the other hand, I can have a very timid faith that the frozen pond will hold my weight, and if it truly is thick ice, the timid faith will grow stronger as I get to know better the object of my faith. In this case, coming to know something (or Someone) is true can increase my faith.*

It is the Holy Spirit who brings us into union with Christ, first by showing us what is true in a way that changes our lives, and then by uniting us to Christ and nurturing us in that union. This is accomplished through the "means (or instruments) of grace," as church tradition has labeled them. They include the church's ministry of Word and sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). What is being said in this paragraph is encapsulated in what is called "the Great Commission"—Matthew

28:18-20. Jesus commanded his followers to go and "make disciples of all nations, by baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything" Jesus had commanded.

*Q: What does it mean to hear God's Word?*

God the Holy Spirit speaks through the written Word of God to change our lives. Calvin taught that the Word can accomplish nothing apart from the Spirit. Indeed, we have been promised that God's Word will accomplish its purpose (Isaiah 55:11), for it is a sword that is wielded by the Spirit to pierce our lives. But the Word without the Spirit is a dead letter, no better than any other book on spirituality found on bookstore shelves. And the Spirit without the Word is a loose cannon.

But we must emphasize that it is the Spirit who authenticates Scripture as God's Word and illumines Scripture so that we understand it a life-transforming way. Again, Calvin said, "The Word will not find acceptance in people's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit." (See Book I, chapter 7 of his Institutes.)

It is here that the Declaration identifies the first of eleven false forms of discipleship—claims about the church's life that could be traps for all of us. For what it means to hear the

*. . . our task is not to examine the Bible; our task is to be examined by the Bible! It is inspired by God the Holy Spirit in order to change us. (see. 2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

Word of God is not just to read the Word or hear it preached and then continue living our lives unaffected. The book of James says that that is like a man who looks in the mirror in the morning, acknowledges that he has to shave, and then walks away without doing so. (See James 1:19-27.) Instead, we are to "welcome with meekness the implanted word that

has the power to save our souls." (v. 21) As someone has said, our task is not to examine the Bible; our task is to be examined by the Bible! It is inspired by God the Holy Spirit in order to change us (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

*Q: What happens to us at our baptism?*

Baptism is one of two sacraments by which God makes the Word of the Gospel visible to us. More than that, we believe that when these actions of the church take place God's grace comes to us in a way that sustains and nurtures our faith.

In baptism we are united to Christ and to each other. Christ claims us as his own. Baptism does this as a "sign" and "seal" of our union with Christ (to use the language of Calvin and our Reformed tradition).

The imagery of baptism as a "seal" is powerful. In the past, when an official wanted to guarantee the genuineness of a document or a decree the official sealed the paper with wax that was then impressed with the author's ring. In a similar way today, sometimes we guarantee the authenticity of a letter of recommendation, for instance, by signing our name across the flap of an envelope. This gives the enclosed document weight, for it ensures that

*A life of deliberate disobedience and "same old, same old" after liberation and entitlement has been officially pronounced on us would be a denial of the hope that is signified in our baptism and a rejection of our new identity in Christ and his church.*

what is written is the genuine article, and the recipient can be certain that the author stands behind it. In the same way, then, baptism acts as a seal on the good news that is announced and made visible in our baptism. It is the gospel that saves us, just as what is written in the official decree enacts a change of policy; but baptism impresses us with the heartfelt

realization that this gospel is the real thing, just as the seal or signature declares to the recipient that what is written can be trusted to be the genuine article.

Like the sealed document that emancipates a slave or confers a title with privileges and responsibilities on a person, so the announcement of the gospel in the sealing act of baptism

gives us hope that the freedom from sin for which Jesus Christ died and rose, and our engrafting into God's people—Christ's church—with its privileges and responsibilities, will set us on our way to work out in obedience the meaning of our baptism. That is, we are baptized into a future faith and repentance, enabled by the very "policy" announced and guaranteed when our baptism sealed it. This is a point that Paul is making in Colossians 2:8-15 and 3:1-7. A life of deliberate disobedience and "same old, same old" after liberation and entitlement has been officially pronounced on us would be a denial of the hope that is signified in our baptism and a rejection of our new identity in Christ and his church. This is why the Declaration links together baptism and conversion—baptism and a lifetime pilgrimage of turning toward and rooting ourselves more deeply in Christ.

*Q: How is the Lord's Supper connected to baptism?*

In the Reformed tradition we believe that by the power of the Holy Spirit our participation in the Lord's Supper becomes the occasion in which the risen Christ is really present to us and we commune with him in a way that strengthens us. As we spiritually feed on Christ's body and blood (a graphic image that Jesus talks about in John 6:52-59) we realize that Christ is the one whom we have been hungering and thirsting for, because it was to him that we were united in the first place. He is our life, from the moment of our spiritual birth. The Lord's Supper reminds us that our life support system is Christ; pull the plug or attempt to cut yourself out of the life-sustaining Lord to which you have become organically connected, and you will die. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Furthermore, all Christians derive their spiritual sustenance from their union with Christ; we are all connected to each other because we are linked to him. There is one cup and one loaf from which we all partake.

*Q: Why is it wrong to center our church fellowship around a particular theology or political ideology or lifestyle?*

If the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ through the church's ministry of Word and sacraments, then we are warned against forms of church life that seek unity elsewhere or encourage division.

Using the Lord's Supper to illustrate the point, picture communion with a common cup at your church. We could illustrate theological pluralism at the center of the church's life by picturing a church which provides its members with options as they come forward: one elder holds a cup with wine signifying the blood of Christ, but other elders offer alternatives in the spirit of theological pluralism—perhaps an apple from which communicants could take a bite, a pipe from which some could share a puff, and a statue before which others could prostrate themselves.

The religious relativism against which the Declaration warns would be "anything goes" attitude toward the Christ's meal. Some could go forward to join others in drinking from the cup that re-presents Christ's blood, but others might want to take a sip of the latte they brought while others might step out to grab a cola from the machine in the church basement. Some might just prefer to do nothing.

Another alternative to the Spirit-enabled union with Christ is syncretism. Here we might line up the elders in the illustration we used with theological pluralism and have everyone partake of all the options.

In each case what is lost is the truth that we are spiritually alive and connected with each other only as we remain in union with Christ. Like a cluster of grapes cut from the life-sustaining vine into which it was engrafted, when we deny our union with each other by

basing it on something other than the Spirit's work through the Word and sacraments, we eventually shrivel up and fall apart.

Jesus Christ has broken down the walls that separate us (even if those walls are constructed of race, socio-economic class, or gender).

Paul illustrated this with reference to the wall in the Jewish temple that had separated Gentile from Jew (see Ephesians 2:14). In his person, Paul taught, Jesus has become our peace. Like two live wires that lie useless and harmless until someone comes along and

*Like a cluster of grapes cut from the life-sustaining vine into which it was grafted, when we deny our union with each other by basing it on something other than the Spirit's work through the Word and sacraments, we eventually shrivel up and fall apart.*

holds one in each hand (Don't try this at home!), so Jesus connects otherwise impotent and stray human beings and unites them, making them alive in him.

Take a look at John 17:21. Denying the significance of our baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper—our engrafting and sustained union in Christ—ends up being a witness against the relationship of Father and Son in the trinity. That is the crucial area of our union in Christ to which the Declaration calls attention in the next section.

<----- COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT ----->

## Small group discussion

Pass out the following discussion questions to small groups to read and report back to large group (if time permits)

- Read James 1:22-27. Discuss the relationship between hearing and doing the Word in *your* church. What is significant about James' tests for "true religion?"
- Read Colossians 2:8-15, 3:1-11. What is the similarity between circumcision and baptism in this passage? What expectations for our lives does Paul associate with baptism?
- Read John 6:52-59. These verses might sound strange to the uninitiated. What is their significance in light of this section of the Declaration?
- Read section II of the Declaration together. The declaration identifies eleven forms of church life Christians should avoid (the statements begin "we turn away from. . ."). Evaluate the three given in section II and bring back to the whole group information gained concerning the following questions:
  - What cultural and ecclesiastical conditions has made this Declaration necessary?
  - The Declaration turns away from forms of Church life that seek unity "in theological pluralism, relativism, or syncretism." This may appear to some to be a "hard line" position. Why does the Declaration's interpretation of unity in Christ lead to the rejection of other suggested bases for unity? What do you understand "unity in Christ" to mean?

### DEFINITIONS

**THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM:**  
*The theory that there are many different ways to God; following the teachings of Jesus Christ is just one among many others.*

**RELATIVISM:** *Any theory of ethics or knowledge based on the idea that all values or judgments are equally true, valid, differing according to circumstances, persons, cultures, etc.*

**SYNCRETISM:** *A combination of varying, often mutually opposed beliefs, principles, or practices, esp. those of various religions, into a new conglomerate whole sometimes marked by internal inconsistencies.*

## To do at home this week

READ and reflect on section III of Declaration for next week and:

- *Think about the tension between God accepting us "just as we are" and God calling us to live an amended life. What does this tension mean in your life and faith walk? Are there certain times in the Church's life where one side of this tension should be emphasized over the other?*
- *Why does the Church not allow societal divisions of race, gender, nationality, or economic class into the eucharistic fellowship? How true is this in your local congregation?*

## Closing

Close with prayer and the singing (or reading) together the words to the following great hymn of faith: "Holy, Holy, Holy" (# 580 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

## Session #4: Our Life in Christ

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the session is to:

- Discuss the position of Jesus Christ as our High Priest and the relationship of righteousness between Jesus Christ and believers
- Seek to understand the relationship between the authority of Scripture and an appropriate manner of interpreting Scripture
- Explore what being “in Christ” means for our lives as we share in the love Christ demonstrates for us

In preparation for the session participants will:

- read section III and be prepared to discuss

### COMING TOGETHER

Begin by reading Hebrews 3:1-2; 4:14-5:4 aloud. Then ask:

- *What do you think these verses are saying to the church today?*
- *What do these verses mean for your life?*

### THE LESSON

Hebrews 3:1 would have been especially meaningful to Jewish Christians. For Jews, the highest human authority was the high priest. For Christians, the highest human authorities were God’s apostles. Jesus, God’s apostle (meaning “one who is sent”) and high priest, is the ultimate authority in the church.

Continue reading Hebrews 3:2-6. The author uses different pictures to explain Jesus’ relationship to believers, he is:

- the apostle (“one who is sent”) of God to whom we should listen
- our High Priest, through whom we come to God the Father
- the ruler of God’s house whom we should obey

Often times in Christian theology we speak of these three offices of Christ: prophet, priest, and king.

*Q: What are the implications, especially of the high priesthood of Jesus, in the development of this section of the Declaration?*

The answer to this question and this section of the Declaration imply one of the "non-negotiables" of the Christian faith—a belief that is unique among all the world's religions and which the entire Christian church has held as central since it articulated this doctrine in the Nicene Creed (325/381).

The doctrine of the trinity insists that God is one being in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is known to us in these three persons, especially as the three persons play different roles in the drama of God's interactions with human beings. (Note that it would be wrong to equate "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" with the three-fold "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer," since, for instance, all three persons of the trinity were involved in the creation of the universe; see Genesis 1:2, John 1:1-3.) Just as a prism reveals to us the colors of the

spectrum that are always present in light, so in God's dealings with the creation the three eternal persons of the trinity make themselves known to us.

Even before God created, the three persons were in relation to each other. In fact, that is what is most significant about these names of God. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

*Just as a prism reveals to us the colors of the spectrum that are always present in light, so in God's dealings with the creation the three eternal persons of the trinity make themselves known to us.*

are not referring to gender, but to the relation that each sustains with the others. We must be careful: We do not have the prerogative as his creatures to call God whatever we want. God tells us what names to use. (Just as those in your class are to address the others by the names that each one prefers. It would be presumptuous—not to mention rude—if you called each person in your group whatever pleased you.) So, John 3:16 tells us that the second person

of the Trinity is the "only begotten Son" of the Father. And the Son stands in a unique relation with the Father, for every time that Jesus, the incarnate Son, refers to his Father when talking to the disciples he does not use the adjective "our." From eternity, God the Son enjoys a relation to the God the Father that we, God's creatures, do not have by nature.

But here is the exciting good news that the Declaration makes clear in this section: We are invited to participate in the Son's relation with the Father, and this is made possible by the other member of the trinity—the Holy Spirit. (See how Paul puts it in Romans 8:14-17 and Galatians 4:4-7.) Furthermore, this is in part the significance of Christ's role as our High Priest: he intercedes for us on our behalf and ushers us into the very presence of the Father. (See Hebrews 3:1-6 and 4:14-5:10.)

Only Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, could have brought us into this relationship, because he is God. Since all of creation was implicated in the Fall (Rom 3:23), no part of creation could have accomplished what the sinless and perfectly obedient one did by taking the penalty of death upon himself (Rom 6:23), having become our sin so that we might become his righteousness (I Cor 5:21). As Luther put it, Christ took on an alien sin so that we might take on an alien righteousness.

Righteousness simply refers to "right-relatedness." Christ was righteous because he perfectly obeyed the Law, which itself is simply a set of instructions for maintaining right-relatedness with God and each other (consider the content of the Ten Commandments). Now we can share in Christ's righteous relation with the Father as we are united with him.

*Q: How do we know that the Bible is the Word of God? And in what sense does Scripture have authority?*

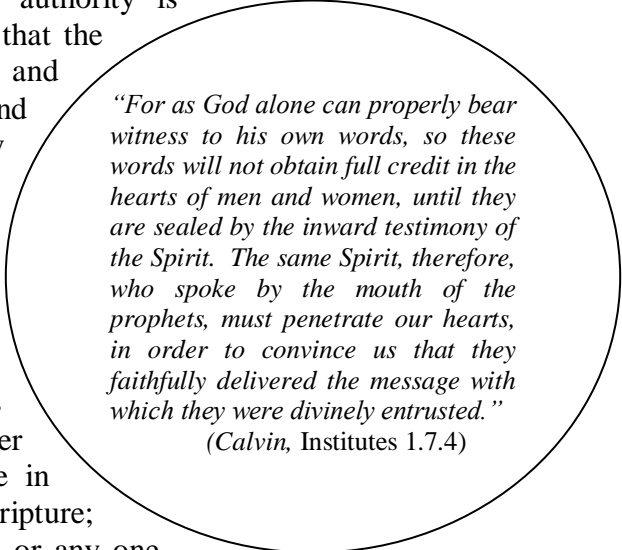
What would you think of God if creation was all you had to go on? Psalm 19 and Romans 1 make it clear that we would know that there is a god. But what kind of God? Would scorching heat, unrelenting hurricanes, destructive tornadoes, and famine-producing droughts lead you to believe that God is the all powerful, all loving God we confess as Christians? Probably not. So how do we know that this creator is holy and loving and powerful? We know this God because Jesus Christ has made God known.

But, then, how do we know who Jesus is? God's grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ is the central message of the Bible. As John Calvin put it, Jesus comes to us clothed in Scripture. And then, as Paul puts it, we perceive "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). So we who are in union with Christ participate in the Son's knowledge of the Father, particularly as this knowledge comes to us in Scripture. Calvin compared it to a corrective lens that a nearsighted person has to wear; the book of creation has "God" written

all over it, but our spiritual eyes are distorted by sin so that we cannot make out what is there without the lens of Scripture. But how do we know if we can trust Scripture?

The Protestant Reformers taught that the Bible is "self-authenticating." That is, it proves its own authority to every believer. What they meant by that was that because the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and illumines those who read it (e.g., see 1 Corinthians 2:14-16), Scripture is able to confront us as having God's own authority. It is a living Word. And it shatters the reader's own ideas and establishes itself as the authority over the believer. As Calvin put it, Scripture's authority is "superior to human judgment": ". . . we feel that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there. By this power we are drawn and inflamed, knowingly and willingly, to obey him, yet also more vitally and more effectively than by mere human willing or knowing!" (Institutes, I.7.5)

Only the Bible has this authority, because God has chosen the testimony of these 66 books through which to meet us and speak to us by the work of God's Spirit. This same Spirit has been at work in the church over the last two millennia, guiding God's people in understanding what God has to say to us in Scripture; it is not the prerogative of any one Christian or any one faction to claim an inside track on the meaning of the text.



*"For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men and women, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets, must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely entrusted."*

(Calvin, Institutes 1.7.4)

*Q: How do we define the love of God? How did Jesus demonstrate God's love to us?*

As Jesus prayed in John 17, our love for each other—our unity as sisters and brothers of Christ—should be a reflection of the love between the Son and the Father—their unity. That unity is tight! The ancient church expressed the unity of the three persons of the trinity as "co-inhering" each other (*perichoresis* in Greek; see Declaration commentary). And we participate in this love in that we participate in the Jesus's relation to the Father.

The incarnate Son's love for the Father—and for us—was defined by his obedience to the one he loved and who loved him. In fact, the same is true for us. Love is too important a word to leave undefined, and in Christianity love is demonstrated by our obedience to the God we love. In fact, 1 John defines the love of God as obedience to his commandments (see 1 John 5:2-4).

This kind of love serves others in obedience to God. Jesus made this clear when he humbled himself to become as a human and served those who were slaves to sin (Philippians 2:6-11). He met us at our lowest. He did not even wait for us to pull ourselves out of our own mudhole; instead, he got his hands dirty, wrestled with us in our own mud, and risked his good name, reputation, and life to redeem undeserving, sinful, unworthy humans.

And so, Christ's self-abasing love becomes the pattern for our own lives, as we obey his command to be witnesses of this Gospel of God's mercy (Matthew 28:18-20). The ensuing process of salvation is the Lord's way of sanctifying us and bringing us together as the new people of God. That brings us to the next section of the Declaration.

<----- COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT ----->



We participate in the Son's relationship with the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Small group discussion

In groups of 4-6 reflect on the following questions:

- Why is it important that we participate in Christ's righteousness or "right-relatedness" before God? Does it help to know that "righteousness" and "justice" mean basically the same thing in the New Testament? Why is it important that God cares about righteousness? Is being rightly related to God a prerequisite to being rightly related to each other?
- Why do you think the Declaration maintains that Scripture is only properly interpreted within the community of faith?

### To do at home this week

*Illumination* empowers contemporary readers to understand and obey God's Word (1 Cor. 2:14/ 2 Tim. 3:16). During the coming week, read 1 John. As you read consciously rely upon the Holy Spirit for illumination. JOURNAL how the *illuminated* Word converts and sanctifies you as you read.

- Reflect on: 1) What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God? 2) How might the bible be used by people in both ways? 3) How are love and holiness related? ...love and obedience?
- Read section IV of the Declaration and be prepared to discuss in class.
- *Extra credit!* Read Romans 6&7

### Closing

Close with a prayer and read or recite in unison one of the following hymns of the church: "Called as Partners in Christ's Service" (#343 The Presbyterian Hymnal) or "The Church's One Foundation" (#442 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

#### DEFINITIONS

**GRACE** = The gift of God's unmerited and undeserved love. By it we are forgiven, accepted, and nurtured. Not to be confused with amnesty or ignoring sin.

**RIGHTEOUSNESS** = Being "put right"; according to some standard that defines "right." – God the Father is righteous (just); Jesus Christ his Son is the Righteous (just) one; the Father through the Son and in the Spirit gives the gift of righteousness (justice) to repentant sinners for salvation.

**REPENTANCE** = To turn away from sin and toward God.

**CO-INHERING** = to exist in a bound of natural & inseparable quality / character. See innate = that which belongs to something as part of its nature or constitution without ability to be separated.

## Session #5: Christ's Life in Us

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the session is to:

- focus on the doctrine of sanctification
- understand the significance of God's Law for our sanctification
- open up the issue of sexual purity
- discuss the significance of the call for the church to be transformational in the world – to ask, “What is our value and purpose?”

In preparation for this session participants will:

- read section IV and be prepared to discuss
- read Romans 6 & 7 (encourage reading this passage with a good commentary, especially if participants have not studied the book of Romans – this session will not allow time to become a study on Romans 6 & 7)

### COMING TOGETHER

Throw out these questions to get the class started, but don't spend too much time on this; there is a lot to cover in this session. (If time permits, you may wish to divide this session into two parts: the first part deals with sanctification; and the second part deals with issues of sexual purity and the church's calling to be transformational in the world.)

- What were some of the “rules” that were taught in your religious upbringing?
- Do you feel “married” to the living Christ, or to some religious code? Explain.

(discussion questions taken from *Serendipity Bible*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed.)

### THE LESSON

Using the diagram on the student handout sheet for this session and referring to the vocabulary list from last session, be sure the class understands the following terms: grace; justification; sanctification.

*Q: What does it mean to be in the process of sanctification?*

In this session we are going to take a look at the process of becoming “holy” or sanctified (sanctification). This concept is popular today under the heading of “spiritual development” or “spiritual formation.” It has also become “in vogue” to have a “spiritual mentor or director” to support and encourage one's faith development. Spiritual disciplines are to be cultivated in a Christian's life (see Rom. 12:1-2); however, caution should be used in any spiritual direction that is not based in the Word of God.

We do not seek to become holy in order to be acceptable to God. We become holy because clothed in Christ's righteousness we have already been accepted by God. It is God's grace that transforms us. Engaging in spiritual disciplines (such as fasting, serving others, prayer) is similar to a spiritual angioplasty that opens us up to the free flow of God's grace in our lives.

So sanctification follows on the heels of justification and leads to glorification. In fact, there are three tenses to salvation in the Christian life: I have been saved (justified); I am being saved (sanctified); and I shall be saved (glorified).

*Q: What is the purpose of salvation? Is it just being in a state of grace (forgiveness) and God's acceptance, or is there something more that should be taking place in our lives?*

In John 3:3, Jesus states bluntly that only those who are “born again” can “see the kingdom of God.” The Spirit’s reviving moves us to repent and trust wholly upon Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Once we were “dead” in our sins, but now God has made us “alive” in Christ! (see Col. 2:13). This work of God, making us holy, is called sanctification.

God’s work not only breaks the bondage of sin, but it also claims us for Christ’s kingdom purposes in history. Salvation entails a basic reordering of our priorities and a reorientation of our perspective on life, all in the light of Christ’s kingship. This is what Jesus means in Matthew 6:33 when he instructs his disciples to seek the kingdom first. We are not to think of ourselves first as Democrats or Republicans, capitalists or socialists, red, yellow, black, or white. Jesus Christ and his kingdom must reorder our thoughts and actions; to put anything else in that position is idolatry.

This reordering and reorientation is aimed at a recovery of the image of God in which we were created—something that was severely warped when the human race fell into sin. The process of sanctification, then, is the process of recovering the image such that one day we shall perfectly reflect the character of God. It'll be "right back at ya"! And since Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15), our growing conformity to Christ is our recovery of the image of God in us. (Look at Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 and the surrounding context of each verse.)

*We are not to think of ourselves first as Democrats or Republicans, capitalists or socialists, red, yellow, black, or white. Jesus Christ and his kingdom must reorder our thoughts and actions; to put anything else in that position is idolatry.*

It's as if the Fall so disordered our lives that the image of God—our mirroring of God's character—was shattered and warped. The process of becoming more Christlike involves the restoration of that image so that one day when God looks at us God sees a perfect reflection of the divine character.

*Q: What role does the Law of God play in all of this?*

One of the important insights of the Reformed tradition is the so-called third use of the Law (such as the Ten Commandments). The Law not only condemns us because we cannot keep it and drives us to seek a savior, and it not only gives guidance for living together in civil society, but it also gives shape to the graced life. That is, the Law shows us what it looks like to be a person who is being transformed by God's grace. This makes sense when you realize: (1) the Law flows out of the character of God and expresses God's character; (2) the image of God is being renewed in us; so (3) our renewal into the image and character of God will be in conformity with the Law God has given. This helps to make sense of Jesus' claim that he never came to abolish the Law, but to unpack its deeper significance (see Matthew 5:17).

Grace frees us to obey the Law, not in order to score points with God. (Grace can not be earned or deserved.) It frees us to obey the Law out of love for God because we now know that we have the possibility of living the full life that God always wanted us to have. As the Reformed theologian Karl Barth put it, through Christ command becomes permission. In other words, for the Christian who is growing into Christ's image the command "You shall not commit adultery" really means, "You have now been freed by Christ's work and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the kind of person who keeps promises. You can be a faithful person."

God keeps his covenant promises, as he did with Israel time and time again (e.g., see Psalm 78); now we are freed from bondage to sin to be like God. Think about the other commandments of God: In what way can they be redescribed as permissions?

*If the same God who manufactured and wired us—including our sexuality—is the same God who gave us instructions about maintaining our lives so that we can experience life to its fullest, then we should welcome the Law as much as we would a booklet of instructions for programming a cordless phone or building a swingset.*

Some people have suggested that the biblical concept of law should be thought of as instruction. That makes good sense. If the same God who manufactured and wired us—including our sexuality—is the same God who gave us instructions about maintaining our lives so that we can experience life to its fullest, then we should welcome the Law as much as we would a booklet of instructions for programming a cordless phone or building a swingset. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the commandment to keep the Sabbath is a gift we were reluctant to accept, so God made it a commandment. In the same way, we could see all of God's commands—including those about how we think and act sexually—as

God's gifts to us, as those commands have come down to us in Scripture, interpreted by the Holy Spirit who works in and through the community of faith throughout the centuries.

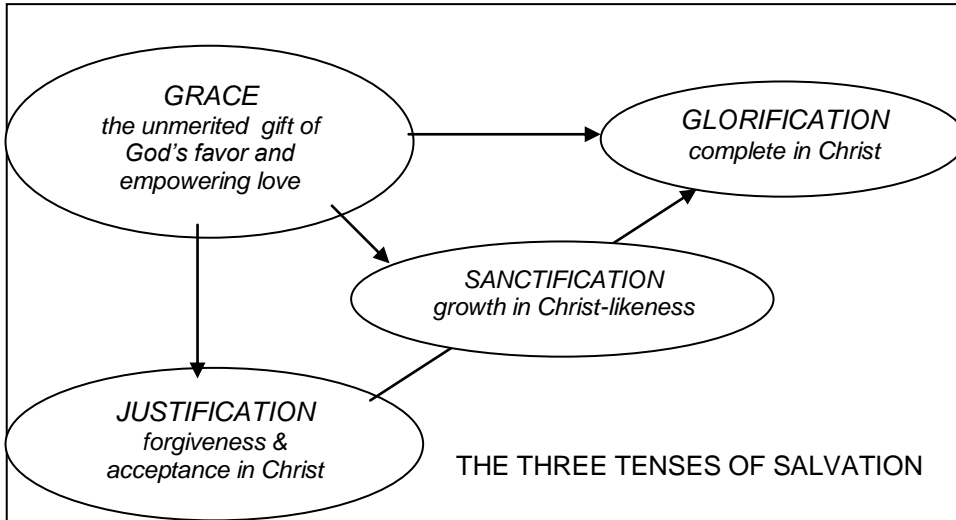
*Q: Why should we seek to be transformed personally and corporately in the body of Christ if we are under grace? In other words, why should we live subject to God's rule if God loves us unconditionally?*

Under God's rule, believers are called from self-interest to self-sacrificial service for Christ (Rom. 12:14-21). While we cannot earn or merit God's forgiveness, our actions demonstrate that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Eph. 2:10). In fact, if we are truly "in Christ" we must do good works, for "every good tree bears good fruit." (Matt. 7:17).

A crucial role of the church is to provide support, training and encouragement to all Christian adults and children in their midst. Special care must be taken to equip families for their role in shaping character. This role is imperative since Christ's kingdom contradicts the desires and expectations of this world. That is why Scripture places so much emphasis upon the spiritual disciplines by which we replace the habits of sin with the habits of righteousness by following the example of Christ (Gal. 5:22-26). Scripture outlines a twofold pattern for the lifelong process of sanctification: crucifying the old nature and rising with Christ to a developing life of holiness (Col. 3:5-10; Rom. 12:1-2). Imitating Jesus Christ and thereby being remade in his image is not an individual pursuit. The church functions, in part, to hold us accountable to Christ's commands. That is why Paul and Peter wrote their letters to various churches. Actually, this is every believer's responsibility. It is part of what is meant by "the priesthood of all believers." All are called to "teach and admonish" (Col. 3:16) and even "carry each other's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). And the explicit context for both passages is discipline—shaping the practice and understanding of other believers! (from Welcome to the Family, 106-107) This leads us to the final section of the Declaration.

*The church functions, in part, to hold us accountable to Christ's commands.*

<----- COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT ----->



**DEFINITIONS**

**REDEMPTION** = To free or buy back with a payment. Jesus Christ paid with his death to get us back from sin and death. (Rom. 3:24; 8:23)

**JUSTIFICATION** = To be made right with God; being forgiven and made fully acceptable to God. -- The Apostle Paul insists that people are not justified by what they themselves do. Justification comes not by works but by faith. It is a free gift from God (Rom. 4:25; 5:18)

**SANCTIFICATION** = Growing in divine grace (holiness) as a result of Christian commitment after baptism or conversion. To be set apart for the use intended by the designer. (Example: A pen is "sanctified" when used to write. eyeglasses are "sanctified" when used to improve sight. In theological sense, things are sanctified when they are used for the purpose God intends.

**GLORIFICATION** = The ultimate state of the believer after death when he or she becomes like Christ. (1 John 3:2)

## Small group discussion

In small groups of 4-6 reflect on the following questions:

- What does it mean that Jesus is the Holy One of God (John 6:69)? What are the implications for our holiness? (Remember to work this through in light of our union in Christ.)
- Explain in your own words the relationship between LAW and GRACE.
- What role does prayer have in our congregation for those who struggle with sexual issues and practices? What would be the practical results of forgiveness and "restoration"? How does your answer fit in with the relationship between law and grace?

## To do at home this week

- Read section V of the Declaration and Ephesians 4 and be prepared to discuss in class.
- In your quiet times this week reflect and JOURNAL on the following:
- In light of Paul's discourse in Rom. 6 & 7 on the "old sin nature" vs. the "new nature in Christ," as well as the Declaration's statement on "moral and sexual confusion," how do you respond to the reaffirmation of the traditional teaching of the Church in regard to marriage between a man and a woman?
  - In what ways are you personally being "sanctified" and growing in Christ-likeness? What proactive measures could you take to allow and encourage the work of sanctification in your life?  
*(extra credit! Read and reflect on Romans 12 in which Paul moves from the theological principle of grace to the practical guidelines for living as redeemed people in a fallen world.)*

## Closing

Close with a prayer and either sing or recite together the words to the following hymn of the church: "God's Law is Perfect and Gives Life" (#167 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

## Session #6: The Church as the Body of Christ

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the session is to:

- Consider in what ways our unity *in* Christ transcends boundaries
- Look seriously at the mission of the church as the church is called to action in the world

In preparation for this final session, participants will:

- read section V and be prepared to discuss
- read and reflect on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, in which he moves from the theological to the practical, giving guidelines for living as redeemed people in a fallen world.

### COMING TOGETHER

Read Ephesians 4:1-16 together. Then have the group address these questions:

- What is the significance of the word "therefore" in verse 1?
- What is the key word in verses 4-6?
- Based on all that Paul mentions in this passage, what is it going to take to follow his instruction to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?

### THE LESSON

In this final session the class will reflect on how the church functions, or ought to function, as the body of Christ in the world.

*Q: What does unity in the church look like?*

In session #3 we already spoke about the unity that exists in the church because of the person of Christ. This unity is not mere human nor a fabricated uniformity. In fact, this unity privileges none (even the present generation), for, as Paul implies in Ephesians 3:18-19, we really only gets to know all the dimensions of God's love in Jesus Christ "with all the saints." And while Paul focuses on the Spirit-created unity of Christ's body in Ephesians 4, he focuses on the diversity of gifts within that body in 1 Corinthians 12, insisting that none is dispensable nor unimportant.

In the Presbyterian church this unity is expressed in our polity. Our Reformed tradition has emphasized structure and organization to facilitate Christian nurture and the work of the Holy Spirit. (Paul's imperative in 1 Corinthians 14:40 sometimes acts as a Presbyterian motto!) Our Book of Order describes our orderly way of life as a "covenant life marked by disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word." The same Book of Order insists on the autonomy of the individual's conscience. The result is sometimes a balancing act between structure and freedom. Nonetheless, for us structure is a means of grace that is used by the Holy Spirit to change us.

We are all bound together in Christ. Whereas historically in an episcopal polity (or form of church government) unity is grounded in the bishop, in a presbyterian polity unity is worked out in layers of representative assemblies that bind us together in a tangible way. Can you find evidence of the need for order and structure in the first-century church as we find it discussed in the New Testament?

Our polity witnesses to our Christian conviction that no congregation is an island unto itself; each is to be supported by and held accountable to the others. Or, in other words, each local congregation is, in a sense, a manifestation of the entire body of Christ in a particular place and time. In fact, even as we worship on Sunday mornings or carry out our business in session meetings or at presbytery, we are united with saints who've come before us. As the hymn puts it, we are "in mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won."

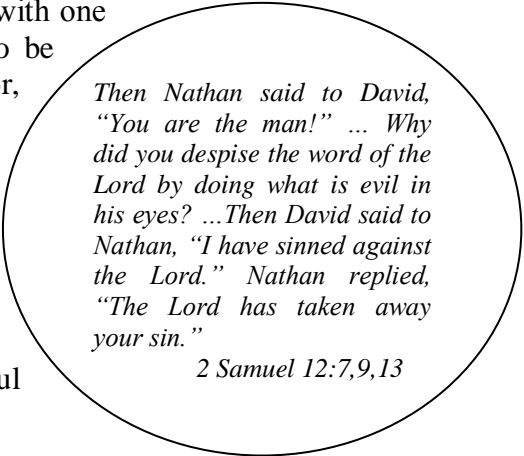
*Q: How can we help each other grow up into Christ as one body?*

We exercise the spiritual gifts that each of us has been given by the Holy Spirit and minister to one another in *truth and love* (the priesthood of all believers). See Paul's words in Ephesians 4:7,11-12,15-16.

We are to minister to one another in an atmosphere that combines realism and honesty with graciousness and tolerance. This is a delicate balance to maintain. Too much truth at the expense of love is *harsh*. Too much love at the expense of truth is *compromising and wishy-washy*. Jesus taught his disciples that they could minister to one another by washing each other's feet with water. Someone has described the balance of truth and love that must characterize *our* ministry to one another as the art of getting the temperature of the water right—it must be neither too hot nor too cold.

On the one hand we must be straightforward with one another. Your problems and needs affect me and mine affect you, because you and I belong together—whether we like it or not—in Christ's Body. We must deal honestly with one another in the Body not because we are trying to be judgmental, not in order to show ourselves superior, but for the purpose of restoring a brother or sister to wholeness, for supporting another in hard times, or for celebrating the success of one who is growing in his or her relationship with Jesus.

One example from the Old Testament is the time that Nathan confronted David with his sins of adultery and murder. His model for combining the truth with love and respect for David is a powerful model for all believers (2 Sam. 12).



*Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" ... Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? ... Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin."*

*2 Samuel 12:7,9,13*

*Q: What is the mission of the church?*

The Declaration makes it clear that the church shares in every aspect of Christ's mission. Since Jesus went around preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, casting out demons, healing people of diseases and disabilities, freeing the oppressed and lifting up the poor, we can do no less in our mission emphases. (See Mark 1:32-39; Luke 4:16-21, 7:20-23.) We must evangelize and engage in humanitarian service. The Declaration lists four areas that specifically cover all the dimensions of our share in Christ's mission to the world. When the church ceases to engage in this mission, it fails to be the church.

*Q: What keeps us going?*

The mission of the church in the world can sometimes seem an exhausting task. It is not easy. It might even get you crucified! But we live and do our work in the light of the resurrection.

The church community is shaped by a shared vision of a coming society (the kingdom of God in all of its fullness), and the church's public behavior is determined by this vision of the completion of God's shalom (a peace with justice). As the Declaration makes clear, it is God who will establish this kingdom. Our life together is merely a witness to what we have seen—a preview of a coming attraction. Just like little children whose language and behavior and attitude noticeably changes when Christmas is around the corner, so the children of God who comprise the church should be noticeably different before a watching world that might then suspect that something is coming.

<- - - - - COPY THE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR EACH PARTICIPANT - - - - - >

## Small group discussion

In small groups of 4-6, discuss the following questions:

- What does it mean that we are part of a historical Church and an international communion? Explore the implications for the life of your congregation.
- It is often said that Christians of good conscience can disagree over important matters. On what matters can they *not* disagree, and how far can disagreement go before the Church has to consider issues of discipline?
- Review the Declaration's identification of four aspects of the church's holistic mission. Can you identify specific ways in which your church is engaged in these? Is your church balanced in its coverage of these aspects?
- The Declaration ends on a note of hope and promise. Why is the living of our union *in Christ* a reason for great joy rather than a recipe for exhaustion and frustration?

### To do at home this week

Reread the Declaration and spend time each day in reflection and prayer asking God to speak to your heart and lead you in the direction that He can use you and your gifts to be a catalyst in bringing the Kingdom of God into the hearts of your congregation, our denomination and the world.

*"It is impossible for any that have it, to conceal the religion of Jesus Christ. This our Lord makes plain beyond all contradiction, by a two-fold comparison: 'Ye are the light of the world: a city set upon a hill cannot be hid.'.... Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the midst of heaven . . . So impossible it is, to keep our religion from being seen, unless we cast it away; so vain is the thought of hiding the light, unless by putting it out! Sure it is, that a secret, unobserved religion cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ."*

*John Wesley (Wesley's Standard Sermons 1:388-89)*

## Closing

Close this final session with prayer and end by either singing or reciting in unison the words to one of these great hymn of faith: "A Mighty Fortress" (#260 The Presbyterian Hymnal) or "The Church's One Foundation" (#442 The Presbyterian Hymnal)

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