

Experiencing God

Leader's Guide

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F E A T U R I N G

Frederick Gaiser came to Luther Seminary as a lecturer in Old Testament in 1973 and was promoted to professor in 1991. He has served as acting dean of students (1986-88) and as registrar (1975-77).

Steven Paulson joined the Luther Seminary faculty as associate professor of systematic theology in the fall of 1998 after serving as assistant professor of religion at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minn., since 1993.

Diane Jacobson came to the Luther Seminary faculty as an assistant professor in 1982, and was promoted to associate professor in 1990. In 1999, she became professor of Old Testament. She was chair of the biblical division from 1993 to 1996.

Alan Padgett joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July 2001. Previously, he served as professor of theology and the philosophy of science at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, Calif., since 1992.

Mary Hess joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July of 2000. She received her master of theological studies degree in 1992 from Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. In 1998, she received her Ph.D. in religion and education from Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Mass.

Sarah Henrich came to the Luther Seminary faculty in 1992 from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where she had been assistant professor of New Testament (half-time) since 1989.

David J. Lose joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July of 2000. Previously, he had served as a pastor at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Princeton Junction, N.J., and as a teaching fellow and visiting lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, N.J.

Richard Wallace joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 1999 after serving as Director at the Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta (LTCA), where he had been since 1997.

Matt Skinner joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 2002. He earned his graduate degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he also served as a teaching fellow and visiting lecturer prior to accepting a call to Luther Seminary.

Lois Malcolm joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 1994 as assistant professor of systematic theology and became an associate professor in the fall of 1999.

Leader's Guide

FOR THE LEADER

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate this video series on *Experiencing God*! Whether you are sharing leadership in this study, or it is the responsibility of one person, you are participating in something important and meaningful. Thankfully, the discussion belongs to the whole group, and does not rest solely upon your shoulders. Your job is simply to initiate conversation, inviting others fully into the discussion. Keep in mind that people participate in groups in different ways. Some may be more quiet, while others like to speak up. Help facilitate as you see best, welcoming each person to the group, and their contributions. You may need to keep in mind time considerations, helping to keep the group focused and on-track.

You will be in charge of making sure there are all the appropriate materials that the group will need for that session, including photocopies of the study guide sheets and some Bibles. Occasionally, a chalkboard, whiteboard or large easel might be helpful in recording the group's responses, but a piece of paper and a person to record will do.

Before each session, make sure you watch the video, and read the questions to be discussed. Also, read through any biblical material that is mentioned. You might want to give some attention to the place where you will be meeting, setting up the VCR or DVD and TV ahead of time, along with arranging the tables and chairs.

Begin and end each session with prayer. This helps center and focus the group. After watching the video (see **How to Use This Series** for video information), there may be questions or issues that your group wants to discuss that evolve naturally. Go with these if they seem appropriate! Otherwise, follow-up questions are provided to help facilitate discussion.

HOW TO USE THIS SERIES

Each *Experiencing God* session has been created in two versions. The "long form" version features a six single video sessions of about 20-25 minutes, with all three parts within each. This version is ideal for new Christians, bible study groups, Sunday morning forums, new member classes or any situation where groups would prefer to get more content before discussing. The second version, the "kick-start" version, features each part individually at about 5 minutes per part. Each is intended for separate viewing and discussion. This is ideal for very discussion-oriented groups or time-sensitive situations, like opening devotions for meetings, youth groups, confirmation and teacher training.

The only major differences are the separation of the parts and the reduced content in the "kick-start" version. You may both use versions and find that your groups responds better to one or the other. You may find a way to incorporate both over more than one meeting. Whatever version you use, the primary concern is that the members of your group can connect with the material and the discussion.

What you need

- TV
- VCR or DVD player
- Bibles (any translation is acceptable, although the New Revised Standard Version has been used with this study)
- Photocopies of the appropriate sessions for participants
- Paper and pencil/pen for jotting notes

Photocopying

Feel free to photocopy the contents of the Participant's guide to use as handouts.

Session One: Who is God?

Part One: Our Search for God? Or God's Search for Us?

“Seek the LORD while he may be found...” Isaiah 55:6

Discussion Questions

1. Which do you think is the more significant question: “Is there a God?” or “Who is God?” Which of these would be your question?

[“Is there a God?” has been the question of the modern age, characterized by skepticism and the need for proof. It is an abstract question—speculative and theoretical—and still, of course, the question of many people. Perhaps the “postmodern” question, however, is more like the biblical question: “Who is God?” This question takes for granted—or at least hopes or believes or feels—that there is “someone out there” (or at least something), but it is not yet sure who that “someone” is, or what kind of God God might be.

2. In the Bible, God encourages the search for God (“Seek the LORD while he may be found...” Isaiah 55:6). Think about this verse: What kinds of things does it imply?

God invites the search for God, and seems even to suggest that some times for the search are more favorable than others. Perhaps the people in your group have been brought to a more “favorable” time. You might ask them to explore this possibility. What might it mean?

The good news of the Bible is that God *wants* to be found, that God is near. While there is always something awesome and mysterious about God and the quest for God, God is not mysterious in the sense that God keeps secrets or that some kind of special knowledge is required to know God: “No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:14).

The New Testament extends this offer, inviting people to a Jesus who is and remains close to us: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1).

3. Another form of the question, “Who is God?” might be “What kind of God is God?” Why does this question matter?

Martin Luther counseled people to hold firmly to the promised mercy of God, warning that the God we believe in is the God we get: “[I]f you believe that God is wrathful, you will certainly have Him wrathful and hostile to you” (Martin Luther, “Psalm 51,” in *Luther's Works*, 12:322). Have people in your group found this to be true?

On the other hand, Luther believed that God was *in fact* gracious and merciful—not that our believing this made it true: “However, the other thought, that God is gracious to sinners who feel their sins, is simply true and remains so. You should not suppose that it will be this way because you believe this way. Rather be assured that a thing which is sure and true of itself becomes more sure and true when you believe it” (Ibid.). Let people talk about how they hear this.

4. Jesus turned the “search for God” issue around: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). Do you hear this as good news?

It might be possible to hear Jesus' statement as though it makes meaningless our own search for God—a search that is very real to the experience of many people. Jesus here does not make the human search meaningless; rather, he makes it possible. Obviously a quest for God—THE God, the One who is Totally Other—would be impossible if God did not choose to be found. And God does; more than that, God chooses us, seeks us out, comes out to meet us. Recall with people the kind of God depicted in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. Recall the joy of the Shepherd in Luke 15:6: “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

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Part Two: Let God Be God

“For I am God, and there is no other...” (Isaiah 45:22)

Discussion Questions

1. “I am God and you’re not” is meant in the Bible to be good news, according to the last speaker in this segment. Do you hear it as good news? Philip Watson puts it a different way in the title of his interpretation of the theology of Martin Luther: “Let God Be God.” How does this sound to you?

The Bible makes not so much a claim as an offer: “For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22). Running the world is taken out of our hands (or the hands of possible lesser deities) and given to the one who is capable of it, because God alone has what it takes. Let people talk about “what it takes.” Power won’t be enough, of course, without the compassion, knowledge, patience, and faithfulness that mark the God of the Bible. Because God is God and we are not, and because of who God is, we can happily “let God be God,” knowing that this will be good for us and for all creation.

2. One of the speakers says that we come to realize that we cannot save ourselves, that we need a savior. Isaiah put it this way, speaking of those who worship idols: “[They] keep on praying to a god that cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). What are our “idols”? How is it that they “cannot save”?

This sentence in Isaiah is one of God’s most poignant speeches in the Bible. God’s concern that people worship God alone is not a demand for its own sake—or for the sake of an insecure and angry deity—but for the sake of the people whom God loves. Worship the true God, the only God, because that is where life is. Listen to Deuteronomy 15:19-20: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Or listen to Ezekiel 18:31-32: “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.” God’s command to worship God alone is never a rigid law for its own sake, it is always a gracious law for the sake of life. Come to God, for with God is life—in all its fullness.

3. So, if we need a savior, and only God can save, the question arises: Save us from what? And for what? What do you think?

The most common Christian answer to this question will probably be that we need to be saved from our sins and for eternal life. Certainly this is the final answer. Still, “saving” in the Bible is a very broad term. God comes to save, to help, to be with us in all the many kinds of limitations and tragedies mentioned in the video. Saving, healing, freeing, liberating, forgiving, helping—all of these can be equivalent terms in the Bible. God comes to do them all, and finally to bring us to live with God forever.

Part Three: God the Creator

“The heavens are telling the glory of God...” (Psalm 19:1)

Discussion Questions

1. The writer of Psalm 8 looked at the heavens and felt overwhelming awe: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?” (Psalm 8:3-4). Have you shared these feelings? How and where have you experienced God in creation? How has it made you feel?

Answers will vary here, of course, just as they do in the Bible. Will the majesty of creation cause people to

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marvel that God cares for them so much (Psalm 8:5) or make them feel like a “maggot” and a “worm” (Job 25:5-6)? The Bible makes clear that creation is “very good” (Genesis 1:31) and that God loves it mightily (John 3:16). For Christians, there is nothing godly about despising the world or seeking to flee it.

2. **“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” says the psalmist (Psalm 19:1), but “there is no speech, nor are there words” (Psalm 19:3). This is why the experience of God in creation is ambiguous, as the speakers repeatedly observe. How have you found an awesome creation to be both inspiring and frightening?**

Again, there are no scripted answers here. As Jesus observes, “[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45)—which might sometimes seem good to us and sometimes not so good. The corollary, of course, is that the hail, too, falls on the just and the unjust. Let people wonder about the glorious mystery of the Creator while steering them away from the notion that everything that happens is God’s will. There are other agents in creation—humans, creation itself, sometimes the “principalities and powers”—and they, too, will have an effect on what happens in the world.

3. **Because “there is no speech” in creation itself, Psalm 19 turns from the glories of nature to the praise of God’s word—the teaching or instruction (Torah) that introduces us to the loving God of the Bible in particular rather than deity in general, a teaching that is therefore “more to be desired” than gold and “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 19:10). Have you found some words of Scripture to be particularly “sweet”? Or, if you are new to Scripture, can you imagine words that might be more precious than gold? What would you want them to say?**

The conversation can be open here. Come prepared to share some of your own “sweet” words of the Bible. Finally, introduce the surprising claim of the New Testament that Jesus is God’s creative “word” in the flesh (John 1:1, 14). Here we find God most particularly, most clearly. Here we see and hear what nature, for all its wonder, cannot provide: an introduction to the God who comes to be with us in all creation’s ambiguities, to live and die with us and for us.

Session Two: What Kind of God?

Part One: Is God Angry?

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” (Psalm 79:5)

Discussion Questions

1. The psalmist’s questions are often our questions: “How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” (Psalm 79:5); “How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). God sometimes seems angry and is frequently portrayed as angry. Many find God distant or vague. How have you experienced an “angry” God or a “distant” God?

For some the “angry God” will be the God of their childhood or of their immediate experience. Others may know this God from language they have heard in church or in the media or in popular culture. Some might see God only as a far off figure, perhaps merely an impersonal “force.” Assure people that their perceptions are sometimes shared by the people of the Bible, that their own discomfort with such notions of God and their own possible anger over such an “angry God” or “distant God” are valid expressions of human experience. By the way, the contemporary sound of the psalmists’ prayers reminds us that, contrary to popular opinion, it was apparently no easier to be an untroubled believer in biblical times than it is today.

Some people might want to defend the picture of an angry God, arguing that “they” or “we” need just such a response. Don’t dismiss this idea, but hold it until the next question.

2. The “wrath of God” is a term that occurs often in the Bible and in Christian conversation. Can you think of ways in which this is an appropriate notion?

Psalm 80 might provide a way to think about God’s wrath. The opposite of God’s terrible anger in verses 4-6 seems to be the longed for shining face of God in verses 3, 7, 19. Here at least God’s wrath or anger seems to imply God’s turning away—and there are certainly things on which God properly “turns his back,” things like sin and death and evil, things that separate us from God. God longs for us, and things that separate us from God “anger” God, using the anthropomorphic language of the Bible. God doesn’t like them! God’s turning away from evil, however, never means God’s rejection of God’s people. God is forever ready to forgive, to restore, to do whatever it takes to bring people back to Godself.

In this conversation, be careful of allowing God’s wrath to be seen as appropriate for “them,” while God’s love is for “us.” The cartoon character Pogo Possum got it right: “We have met the enemy, and he is us!” God is opposed to that within each of us and all of us that separates us from God, and, in Christ, God takes our sin and death to the cross. In this life, we remain both saint and sinner, and God (in God’s “wrath”) continues to oppose the sin and death that remain within us.

3. If some religious conversation dwells too much on God’s anger, might other conversation have too “soft” a view of God’s love? What might this look like?

Sometimes now God seems to be portrayed as rather wimpy—all eager to please, just a “nice guy,” who certainly means no one any harm and who probably couldn’t deliver on it if he did. But God is God, and God will work against things that oppress God’s people and destroy God’s creation. God is neither the take-no-prisoners tough guy (or tough gal!) of the movies nor the well-meaning but bumbling father of the sitcoms. God is strength and God is love.

Session Two: What Kind of God?

Part Two: Is God Father?

“[Jesus] said, ‘Abba, Father...’” (Mark 14:36)

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout history, it seems, the God of biblical faith has been imaged primarily as male, as our “heavenly Father.” As you choose or are able, discuss how this image has worked or not worked for you. Have you found other images that enhance your relationship with God or understanding of God?

Allow open conversation here, with perhaps little comment. Things can become intense and personal in such conversation, so don't try to coerce participation.

2. Despite the broad use of male imagery, the Bible recognizes that “no form” can capture God, not “the likeness of male or female,” and that the attempt to do so will be idolatry (Deuteronomy 4:15-18). Is there a difference, do you think, between making an “idol” of a particular form and the use of personal imagery in language?

Take a look at the Deuteronomy text, which many might find surprising. It's concern, obviously, is idolatry—making no graven image whatsoever—and it obviously did not prevent people in the Bible from addressing God with male terminology. But when does terminology itself become “idolatrous”? In other words, when might particular terminology be used in a way that “captures” God and limits God? Help people consider this question. Remind them that the Bible itself tries to avoid this problem by using an incredible array of verbal images (though *not* physical forms) to portray God—many masculine ones, of course, but also maternal images (e.g., Isaiah 49:14-15; 66:13); various personal images not limited to gender (such as “friend” in Isaiah 41:8 or “helper” in Psalm 54:4); animal images (such as “lion” or “bear” in Hosea 13:8 [not pleasant images!] or “eagle” in Deuteronomy 32:11-12); and inanimate images (such as “rock” in Psalm 18:2 or “shade” in Psalm 121:5). What does the use of this diverse imagery tell us about God?

3. Jesus prayed to God as “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36) and taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). What does it mean that Jesus calls God “Father” (or even “Daddy,” which is one way of translating “Abba”)?

People will have different notions here, depending, perhaps, on their own personal experience of “father” or “daddy.” Begin to lead them here, as does the video, toward the role of “Father” in trinitarian theology—the idea that God the Father and God the Son have a unique personal relationship that defines the nature and character of God. Jesus invites us into his own intimate relationship with God, an unbelievable gift. How can we talk of this in ways that take the essential relationships seriously (between Jesus and his Father and between God and us) while recognizing that, for some at least, the gender issues remain problematic? That discussion remains open, as it will, no doubt, in your group.

Part Three: God—Father, Son, and Spirit

“...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19)

Discussion Questions

1. The Bible insists that there is one God, that God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Why do you think this is important to biblical faith?

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Most of the people in the world of biblical times thought there were many gods and spirits. Different problems required different gods. Different regions had different gods. The gods or spirits were frequently in conflict. The notion of one God, the only God, was a hard-won insight for believers in the God of the Bible. They would not easily call it into question. That is why many Jews and Muslims, who also read the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, regard Christianity as a “heresy” when it speaks of God as triune. It will be important for Christians never to allow the idea of the Trinity to sound as though there are three gods (as it sometimes can). God is one, there is one God: that is the Bible’s core teaching. God alone creates and sustains, redeems and saves, inspires and enlivens. There is no one else or no place else we need to turn.

2. Yet the Bible speaks of God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit (see, for example, Matthew 28:19). Throughout Christian history, people have tried to make sense of this, as do the teachers in the video. What does this mean to you?

Many will speak of different ways in which they experience God (perhaps as Other, as Friend, as divine Presence); some will speak of different ways in which God acts for us (say, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier). Others might speak almost chronologically: God the Father sends God the Son; God, Father and Son, send the Spirit. All of these have their validity—and, not surprisingly, all can go astray if the distinctions are made too absolutely. Guide people toward the notions of community and relationship that are stressed in the video. God as Father, Son, and Spirit suggests that God, as God, is already in community, already is community—such a God will desire and give community, will never be static, will always involve growth and life. The people of such a God will always seek and live in community. This may be the most important thing to understand regarding the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

3. The Bible never uses the terms “Trinity” or “triune.” These arose as Christians tried to make clear what they understood the Bible to say about God. How might you find yourself “at home” with this important language of Christian tradition?

Trinitarian language lies close to the heart of Christian teaching, so it will be important for Christians to honor its historical significance and present use. It is not really optional to “orthodox” (that is, “true”) Christianity. Still, the Trinity remains a mystery that is subject to much conversation and interpretation—as well as much awe and silence (note, especially, Romans 11:33-36). People may express themselves about this in many ways. Encourage them to continue their growth in understanding, through prayer and worship, through study and conversation with other Christians. Assure them that one does not have to “figure out” the Trinity in order to be Christian. None of us will ever “arrive” at full truth here, yet true understandings and experiences of God will come to us as we continue our Christian journey in faith.

Session Three: Jesus: God's Surprise

Part One: More Than We Expected

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?” (Mark 6:3)

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you heard the word “Messiah”? In Handel’s oratorio? As a way to name a superhero? What does the word mean to you?

Jesus is God’s Messiah, according to the New Testament and Christian teaching. But what is a “messiah”? Let people share their own impressions of the word, which might vary greatly. The term is used in religion, in politics, in the arts. It can be positive (an accepted leader) or derogatory (someone with a “messiah complex”). But it usually connotes a person with power (for good or ill) and authority, often someone with considerable personal appeal or “charisma.”

Review the historical sense of the term as presented in the video: the anointed one, the ruler of ancient Israel, the king in the line of David, and eventually the expected ideal king to fulfill the ancient hopes of a restored Israel.

“Messiah” means “anointed one” in Hebrew. The Greek translation, used in the New Testament, is “Christ.”

2. Jesus was God’s promised Messiah, according to the New Testament, but the people of his day saw him only as “the carpenter, the son of Mary” (Mark 6:3). What do you think went wrong here? Or did it go wrong? Can expectations get in the way of surprise?

Let people talk about ways in which they have seen expectations that become too rigid bar people’s experience of surprise or their receiving of gifts. As the video observes, Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, but he came in a way that surprised everyone and offended some so much that they could not believe. He came to exercise a very different kind of power and establish a very different kind of kingdom.

Help people to realize that the problem here was not primarily the fault of Jews but the fault of all humans (including ourselves) who find it difficult to appreciate that God is one who says again and again, “I am about to do a new thing” (Isaiah 43:19). Remind them that although most first-century Jews did not receive Jesus, all of his first followers were Jews who did come to faith in him.

The New Testament proclaims that “every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20), but this does not mean that anyone could or did add up all the Old Testament promises and come out with Jesus of Nazareth as the solution to an equation. After seeing Jesus, the early church recognized with surprise and great joy that this was what God had in mind for them and all people.

Part Two: God Was in Christ

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NKJV)

Discussion Questions

1. What does God look like? What kind of images have you seen? Which ones work for you, or which ones do not?

Invite people to share favorite (or not so favorite) images of God—from the Bible, from art and literature, from popular culture, from their own imaginations. It will become apparent that the images are many and diverse. How can we picture God, for heaven’s sake?! Yet, we must and we will if we are to relate to God. It is at the

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same time a hopeless and a hopeful task.

2. Christians believe that God looks a lot like a first-century Jewish carpenter and teacher. Is this possible? What does this picture of God do for our understanding of God?

We can never fully picture God, but what if God has pictured himself in God's son Jesus? Christians believe Jesus was and is the most perfect picture or image of God (look at Colossians 3:9). True, God is glorious and awesome and beyond all human understanding—unless God has made himself known in ways that we can see and touch. To know God most fully, most truly, we must only come to know Jesus.

This does not mean, of course, that God is limited to resembling Jesus physically—though Christians do believe that God is truly present in the physical Jesus. To see God in Christ is to see Christ's humility and compassion, his giving of himself for others, his love and forgiveness, his justice and his mercy—everything we learn about Jesus from the New Testament. In this way, as Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In Christ, God was not just playing "show and tell," not just giving us a peek at his otherwise hidden image, but God was at work "reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God's presence in Christ is an active presence, bringing us and all the world back into the harmonious relationship with God that we were meant to have from the beginning. This is the God we see in Jesus.

Some of those to whom this idea is new—that God is truly and most fully present in Jesus, that Jesus is God in the flesh—may have difficulty accepting it. You might ask them to suspend their suspicion for a moment and imagine it to be true. What does this do for their understanding of God? Who is the God that emerges from this experiment? Can this truly be God?

Part Three: A Teacher and More

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Discussion Questions

1. Think of pictures you have seen of Jesus. Which ones do you like best? Why do they speak to you? Do some bother you? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

People may mention Sallman's traditional "Head of Christ" or bulletin cover pictures of the Shepherd with the sheep around his shoulders, Dali's surreal "Christ of Saint John of the Cross" or their favorite Madonna and Child. Some may refer to recent pictures of a laughing Jesus or a black Jesus or portrayals of Jesus in motion pictures. Have some of these images been more comfortable for them than others? Have some been too comfortable? Perhaps there are pictures you could gather as example or others you could point to in your church. Ask people to think about the difference between pictures that make Jesus look fully human and those that try to make him look more "like God" (perhaps with halos or auras or other-worldly expressions). Remind them that those who saw the earthly Jesus did not have these clues to his divinity. When he did things that humans should not do or should not be able to do, they were either astonished or offended or both. For them, as for us, coming to see God in Christ is an act of faith, one that will grow and develop as people mature in their Christian life.

2. List some of the ways in which Jesus got into trouble. What do you think this indicates about God's presence in the world?

Some who know the story of Jesus well will be better at this exercise than others who do not, but don't leave out

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those others. They might be able to imagine why certain acts of Jesus offended others. Jesus offended by associating with people who were “from the wrong side of the tracks,” pointing out that “those who are well have no need of a physician” (Matthew 9:12). Like the biblical prophets before him, he challenged hypocritical worship and empty ritual (Matthew 6:5-6). He spoke as one “with authority” (Luke 4:31), though he was a person like others. He challenged sabbath laws and other laws that got in the way of compassionate care for others and meeting human need (Matthew 12:1-14). He called people to radical acts of justice and compassion (Matthew 5:38-42). Even more troublesome, he cast out demons, healed the sick, and forgave sins (for example, Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 12:22-24)—actions that were possible only by God. This is why he was charged with blasphemy (Mark 2:7). Let people talk about how these actions picture God and how uncomfortable people can be in the presence of a God who upsets the status quo. Perhaps they can give examples of how people who call for radical love and radical justice often find themselves in trouble.

3. The video asserts that forgiveness of sins was central to Jesus’ mission. For Lutherans and many other Christians, worship often begins with the confession of sin and announcement of God’s forgiveness. Have you experienced this as a positive thing or, like some, as a “downer”?

Let people have their say here. Some have indeed complained that the regular service of confession is “too negative” or can become mere formality. Others find it refreshing and renewing—the best possible way to enter worship. Perhaps the video’s emphasis on forgiveness as the healing of our relationship with God, restoring us fully to our true, free status as children of God, will help people see the significance of this part of worship, reintroducing its surprising audacity. Perhaps they will be able to contribute ways in which the regular liturgy can reflect the spirit of the gospel that is proclaimed in this action.

Remind people of Jesus’ promise: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Talk about how “abundant life” might be related to or even require the forgiveness of sins. The concentration on *confession* alone might seem negative (endlessly rehearsing one’s faults), but the concentration on confession with *forgiveness* can be remarkably freeing.)

Session Four: Jesus: God With Us

Part One: Beyond Tragedy

“I am the resurrection and the life...” (John 11:25)

Discussion Questions

1. Many have observed that contemporary American culture is in serious denial about the reality of death. Can you think of ways that this is true?

Some might speak of the area of medicine, with our insistence on a pill for all problems or the use of extreme measures to keep people alive at all costs or our discomfort with the process of dying, often trying to keep it at arm's length or behind closed doors. Others might mention the frenetic quality of modern entertainment, the ever present lights to disallow darkness, or our obsession with youth and youth culture. Some might bring up the institutionalizing of the aged, modern funeral practices, our euphemisms (like “passing away”), or the freezing of heads and bodies. The point here is certainly not to place blame on medical personnel, morticians, advertisers, or anyone else, but simply to ponder the meaning of what so many have called our cultural denial of death and to assert that Christian faith takes death with full seriousness.

2. Might religion also be another way to “deny” death? How, do you think, this might happen?

Much of human religion has tried to deal with the question of what happens after death. Think of the Egyptian tombs, with all their paraphernalia for the afterlife. Members of your group might think of other examples. Some types of religion—for example, some Eastern religions and some aspects of modern New Age religion—have claimed that we are essentially spirit (not matter) and that the goal of religion is to escape this earthly existence and find our “true” spiritual selves elsewhere. Christianity, too, can emphasize eternal life at the expense of finding value or meaning in present life. Again, help people see that biblical faith does not seek to deny the world but to redeem it, that God loved creation and human flesh so much that he entered into it, and that this means that death was real even for Jesus. Christian faith seeks not to do an end run around death but to recognize its often grim reality and to proclaim that God has defeated death through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Christianity embraces the “tragedy” of human existence, but insists that Jesus' death is not the final act in the life of a tragic hero. There is more to come!

3. “I am the resurrection and the life,” said Jesus (John 11:25). Is this the same promise, do you think, as “pie in the sky when you die”? Why or why not?

Christian hope has often been criticized as being of making little difference to life now. Christianity has been charged with keeping folks focused on the life to come in order to keep them in their place now. Some in your group might have heard or held similar notions. But Jesus insists that “the hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25, emphasis added). In other words, the power of Jesus' resurrection is already present in the world—for us, too. This is the true power of life that enables Christians to make a difference in all they do. People holding up “John 3:16” signs at football games—whether or not one thinks that this is a good idea—might be saying more than they realize (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”). Without diminishing the hope of life after death, the gospel's promise of “eternal life” begins now and empowers Christians now to life fully, for themselves and others.

Session Four

Part Two: Jesus, Once and Always

“And remember, I am with you always...” (Matthew 28:20)

Discussion Questions

1. **Jesus died. So did Shakespeare and Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. How is Jesus’ promise to be “with you always” (Matthew 28:20) similar to the ongoing “presence” of other great human beings? How is it different?**

People will, no doubt, think of many ways in which great heros or great literary figures are with us “always”: Their words live on and still have great inspirational power. Their memory remains. Often they have followers or teachers who continue the work of the one now deceased. Let people talk about how all of these things might also apply to Jesus. This is as much as many people have been able to say about Jesus, seeing him as simply another “hero” of the past, another human for the history books. But, as we have seen, Christian faith asserts that Jesus was God come to be among us. If true, then the creative power of God that raised Jesus from death continues to ensure Christ’s ongoing presence among us. What will that look like?

2. **You may have heard Christians talk about the “real presence” of Christ in the Word of God and in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. What do you think this means?**

Some may carry over some of the ideas from the question above: that Jesus’ words and memory linger on among his followers—which is, of course, true—but Christians mean more than this with their language about Word and Sacraments. Lutherans relate this promise to the incarnation itself (Jesus coming in human form). Words and water and bread and wine are earthly things, things of creation, and God comes to us in these things just as God came to us in the earthly Jesus. Christ is as fully present in these created things as he was in the flesh of the carpenter of Nazareth. This is a great promise: Christ is not “out there” somewhere, but with us here and now. The Christian “hymn” is not “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” but “God Is Here!” (*With One Voice*, Hymn 719). Sacraments and the Word of God carry Christ to us, show us Christ, bring us the gifts of Christ. For Lutherans, Word and Sacraments are not *about* Christ; they are Christ! Help folks think about what this means: the people of Jesus’ day had no greater advantage than do we; Christ is present for us just as fully as he was for them. Some may not regard this as self-evident, but remind them that neither was it self-evident that God was present in the first-century Jesus. Jesus’ followers came more fully to recognize him as they lived with him. Christians today more fully recognize Christ among us as we live with Word and Sacraments within the community of God’s people.

3. **If someone told you that to meet Jesus you had to “go to church,” would you agree or disagree? Why?**

Let the discussion range freely for awhile. The point, of course, is neither to diminish the importance of “going to church” nor to give the sense that Jesus is present only or even chiefly “in church.” God announced to Israel: “I dwell in the high and holy place and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit” (Isaiah 57:15). The same is true of Jesus. Surely, people can and do meet Jesus “in church”—that is, in Christian worship—and surely Christian people will want to continue to be nourished in their faith by worship and the community of God’s people; but Jesus continues to be present also wherever those people are present, “where two or three are gathered in [Jesus’] name” (Matthew 18:20). And, in trinitarian theology, Jesus Christ as true God continues to be present in all of creation, working to transform it in life-affirming ways. Reading Colossians 1:15-20 will help us recognize the amazing scope of Christ’s work and presence everywhere.

Session Four

Part Three: The Great Reversal

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me...to bring good news to the poor...”
(Luke 4:18)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus promised “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Does the gospel have anything to do with poverty as we know it, or was Jesus only talking of the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3)? What do you think?

People may differ considerably as they discuss this, since there have been major disputes among Christians about these matters. Does God through Christ care only (or primarily) for our “spirits” or “souls,” promising at last an escape from the “troubles of the world” in an eternal afterlife, or is God concerned also for our bodies and our world and our present well-being? Remind your group that Jesus was seen as a prophet (Matthew 21:11; Luke 7:16; John 4:44) and that the prophets spoke passionately about God’s care for the poor and the powerless. As time permits, look at passages like Amos 5:21-24 or Micah 6:6-8 or Isaiah 1:12-17; recall the similar New Testament admonition in James 1:27. The speakers in the video are surely correct in asserting that God’s people must care for the poor and seek justice in this world, while honestly recognizing that there is rarely one clear “Christian” way to do this. Help people maintain the tension between God’s full and complete care for the world and the recognition that, because of sin and the finite limits of earthly life, complete justice and final release from pain will come only in the life to come.

2. One of the speakers in the video used the language of Martin Luther, calling Christians “dutiful servants” of all. Most of us would probably not respond to a classified ad announcing “Servants Wanted.” Can you find a positive meaning in this terminology?

As always, allow open conversation here, without a need quickly to “correct” people’s opinions. “Servant” language is huge in the Bible and Christian tradition, but it is not terribly popular in today’s world. Psychological, social, and political critics have objected that Christianity has sometimes been used to hold people down, disallowing their full human or political potential. Those criticisms should be taken seriously. Still, Christians teach with Jesus that there is no greater love than to give oneself for the other (John 15:13). Such self-giving may fly in the face of popular culture’s insistence on “looking out for number one,” but it is hardly weakness. Only women and men with great strength—spiritual, psychological, social, and political strength—can give themselves to the care of others, the care of the world. Luther observed that a Christian can be “a perfectly dutiful servant of all” precisely because a Christian is “a perfectly free lord of all”—certainly not one who can “lord it over” other people, but one who, in Christ, has been given mastery over the final enemies of sin, death, and the devil. With the security that God cares fully for us, we can care fully for others. (See Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, p. 344.)

3. “Christianity: It’s Not Just for Sunday Anymore!” What do you think this slogan might mean? How do you see the relation between Sunday worship and weekday activities?

People may speak here of trying to live out the love of neighbor in many different ways. Let them spend time talking of what that might look like, especially in their own situations. At an appropriate time, remind them, though, that their being children of God does not depend on their “getting it right” but on God’s unfailing love and forgiveness. What will their forgiveness of others look like? You might also here introduce the idea of Christian vocation (or “calling”)—that all Christians are called to bear Christ’s love to the world and to serve God’s justice in the world through their occupations, home and family, social relationships, and all aspects of life. (See Ephesians 4:1-3.) Help them name (for themselves and others) how they might be agents of love and justice in their immediate situations.

Session Five: Who is the Holy Spirit?

Part One: The Spirit and Spirituality

“God is spirit...” (John 4:24)

Discussion Questions

1. **“Spirituality” has different meanings for different people. What has the term meant to you?**

Let people speak of their spiritual experience or spiritual journeys, being careful to try not to let one person or one kind of idea dominate the discussion. Some might be suspicious of “spirituality,” others might embrace it anywhere and everywhere. For some, it may be related to very particular religious practice (Bible reading, prayer); for others, it might be vague and mysterious. “Spirituality” might not be a term used by some Christians at all. They might speak instead of their walk of faith or obedience or discipleship or simply “being Christian.” To some Christians, “spiritual” matters are very important; others might be more interested in things they term “practical.” Help people understand that there is no one definition of Christian “spirituality,” and, most important, that Christian spirituality will always bear witness to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

2. **Sometimes Christians talk about “spiritual discipline.” Have you found meaningful ways to deepen your spiritual life? According to the video, what pitfalls might come with the practice of spiritual discipline?**

People can learn from one another here and be encouraged in their practice of prayer, Bible reading, journaling, family devotions, communal worship, study, reading classical Christian literature, work in the community, concern for justice, giving to others, visiting the sick, etc. What is meaningful to some might be new to others. Or they may never have thought about how they vote as a “spiritual” discipline, demonstrating concern for neighbor rather than only for self. The danger, as we heard in the video, is that all or any of this might be seen as a way to climb to God, to rely on ourselves, or to be a “better” Christian than others. The spiritual life is always response to what God has done for us; it will never be complete or adequate, and it is not the basis or even the measure of Christian faith. Christian faith is a gift of God through the power of the Spirit. It is based in God’s work for us.

3. **“God is spirit,” according to the Bible, which means that we worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). What do you think this means? To worship “in spirit,” should we try to avoid “things” or involvements with time and place?**

The point here is to keep in mind that, though God is incomprehensible and other—beyond us in every way—God comes to us in the only world we know. The Spirit of God does not work primarily invisibly, but through “means”—the means of God’s grace: God’s Word and the Sacraments. God wants us to know God, so God does not remain far off or appear only to the spiritual elite. God comes in everyday words, in food and drink, in water, in the witness of people like ourselves, with all their faults and insecurities. Worship can, of course, take the form of spiritual “retreat” or silence and austerity, but worship also involves our senses, our neighbors, and all the gifts of creation.

Session Five

Part Two: The Spirit and the World

“Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it...” (Isaiah 42:5)

Discussion Questions

1. The word for “spirit” in the biblical languages also means “wind” or “breath.” What does this mean for your understanding of the Spirit of God?

People will, no doubt, quickly see the significance of this: Wind has great power. Breath is necessary to life. But neither wind nor breath is visible in itself. We see their effects, but not the thing itself. Wind is all around us; breath is within us. These connections make the Bible’s comparison of God’s Spirit to wind or breath work well. People may have stories to share about the force of wind or the importance of breath.

The shared meaning of these words is why some versions of the Bible speak of a “mighty wind” blowing over creation in Genesis 1 and others speak of the “Spirit of God.” Both are possible translations of the Hebrew text. In Ezekiel 37, “breath,” and “wind” and “Spirit” are all involved in giving new life to the “dry bones” of that familiar text. The Spirit of God is invisible, but is as real and as closely related to creation as wind or breath.

2. For some people, religious devotion might include fasting or abstinence from other physical needs and pleasures. What do you think about this?

Invite people to make a case for or against the value of such activities (or non-activities!)—including, if they wish, their own experience. You might provoke interest by reading from Paul in Galatians 5:16-21 (“what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit”) or 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (“I punish my body”). Most people would be able to think of instances where the “body” has gotten them into trouble or caused them pain. Should the goal of religion be to “get beyond” the body? Much religious conversation distinguishes sharply between “body” and “soul.” On the other hand, most biblical scholars don’t read Paul (who placed so much emphasis on Christ’s coming in the flesh) as denying God’s interest in the physical world or our physical selves. “Flesh” is more about a total orientation to self for Paul than about physical bodies. “Spirit” would involve an orientation toward God and others.

Certainly, there are times when fasting and self-denial can be valuable spiritual exercises, making one more attuned to things of God and the concerns of the neighbor. Certainly, self-control is a valid principle of morality and Christian faith. But biblical faith confesses that God leads us into fuller involvement with creation, not out of it. Humans are not divisible into parts—some of them godly, others not. In the Bible, God enjoys creation, and God’s people do as well.

Part Three: The Spirit in the Bible

“...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you...” (John 14:25)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus promised that God would “send” the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ ascension into heaven (John 14:25). The Bible teaches that this happened on Pentecost, when believers were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). So, was the Spirit simply being kept by God “in reserve” before Pentecost?

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People might know pre-Pentecost texts, in both Old and New Testaments, which speak of the work or presence of the Spirit. This could be a place to introduce people to the use of a biblical concordance or Bible dictionary as reference tools to answer questions like this one—and to the church library, which might well have such resources. (Your pastor can help you with these things, if necessary.) It would also be a place to speak more about the doctrine of the Trinity. Sometimes we can make it sound like God was “unitarian” until Christmas (when Jesus came) and then “binatarian” until Pentecost (with the arrival of the Spirit). Make clear that Christians confess that God was and is always “trinitarian”—that the three “persons” of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) always define God because this is *who God is* forever. The Spirit has been active since creation (Genesis 1:2). The Son of God is always “with God” and always “was God” (John 1:1). God’s sending the Son into human history (Christmas) or sending the Spirit to believers in Christ (Pentecost) does not “invent” new aspects of God, though God does make Godself more fully known and actively present in such events.

2. The Bible says that the power of the Holy Spirit can produce amazing things like healings and exorcisms (driving out demons). Have you or Christians you know experienced anything like this? What do you think about it?

Some in your group may have had experience with healings or exorcisms in neo-Pentecostal worship. Others may have been with Christians from Africa or other parts of the world, where such reports are common. The point here is not to debate whether or not such things are “real,” but to hear the testimony to God’s work among such people and to give thanks. Save fuller questions about the “gifts of the Spirit” for the next session. If the issue arises, emphasize that the Bible includes unexplained healings through the power of the Spirit while, at the same time, embracing the healing work of God through the normal channels of creation and human vocation (the fullest statement of which is in an apocryphal reading: Sirach 38:1-14). The Spirit of God is actively involved in healing and actively opposed to evil, sometimes in healings, exorcisms, and other surprising and miraculous ways, sometimes through the everyday work of God’s people.

3. Read Acts 2:43-47, referred to in the video. According to this text, what does it look like when God’s Spirit is present?

Allow people to name the characteristics of this early Christian community: awe at God’s work among them, true and full community, sharing and generosity, common worship, goodwill, growth. The point of such texts is not to create economic models for present life, as though the Bible *requires* the communal ownership of goods, but to emphasize the communal aspects of faithful life in the Spirit. Like all of God’s work, the work of the Spirit is always “for me”—but never in a sense that marks *me* as special or that isolates me from others. The Spirit calls people together for wonder and worship, and promotes goodwill and extraordinary generosity among the people of God.

Session Six: The Spirit is Life

Part One: The Spirit's Work

"[The Spirit] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14)

Discussion Questions

1. With Psalm 51, Christians pray, "do not take your holy spirit from *me*" (Psalm 51:11). With Paul, Christians confess that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to *us*" (Romans 5:5). What is the relation, do you think, between the Spirit for *me* and the Spirit for *us*?

People will probably not have great difficulty talking about this. Both things are true and necessary, of course. In the Bible, the Spirit is both for *me* and for *us*. There is no Christian without the Spirit; there is no Christian who "has" the Spirit alone or in some way "better" than someone else. The Holy Spirit always means to draw us together, to bring us into community. The hallmark of the Spirit is unity (Ephesians 4:1-6). At the same time, if the Spirit is not for *me*, then the Spirit is for no one. As a Christian, I have the Spirit, and so do you—there is a strong bond in that!

Unfortunately, sometimes talk of the Spirit divides rather than unifies. Some may claim that their experience of the Spirit is better than another's or even the only valid experience at all. Others may reject experiences of the Spirit that seem strange to them. Perhaps your group could pause and pray for Christian unity, that all may know the Spirit and acknowledge the Spirit in their sisters and brothers in Christ.

2. The Spirit "will glorify me," said Jesus, "because he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). What is it that Jesus says is "mine" and how might the Spirit "declare" it to us?

Have people look at the text. Amazingly, Jesus says, "All that the Father has is mine" (John 16:15). Or not so amazingly: this is another of the biblical statements that led to formulating the church's teaching about the "Trinity." If everything that is the Father's is also the Son's and all of that can be "taken" by the Spirit for us, then there is an equality among Father, Son, and Spirit that is full and complete. This amazing "network" is God. This means that the Spirit does not have a separate agenda, but is fully involved in "declaring" to us the gifts of God in Christ. This is what Martin Luther had in mind when he wrote in his *Small Catechism* that "the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life." You might read and discuss this passage with your group. Note how Luther maintains the critical connection between the Spirit's work for the individual and for the whole Christian church. Note also that the essential work of the Spirit is nothing other than the work of the gospel of Christ—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. God's cause is not divided—it centers always on God's loving and saving work in Christ.

The quotation is found in *A Contemporary Translation of Luther's Small Catechism*, translated by Timothy J. Wingert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) page 23.

Session Six

Part Two: Experiencing the Spirit

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...” (1 Corinthians 12:4)

Discussion Questions

- 1. Who has the gifts of the Spirit and what do they look like? That question can provoke active and sometimes unpleasant conversation among Christians. Must the “gifts of the Spirit” appear “out of this world” to others? Compare 1 Corinthians 12:1-31 with Romans 12:3-6.**

Spend some time with these biblical texts. They will make clear that, though the Spirit’s gifts do indeed include things like speaking in strange tongues, healings, miracles, and prophecy, they include other essential (and more “ordinary”) elements of faith and life, like faith itself, knowledge, wisdom, teaching, assistance, and leadership (in 1 Corinthians); in Romans, Paul adds ministry, exhortation, giving, and compassion. In both passages, Paul goes on immediately to speak of the most important thing: love. In other words, according to Paul, the Spirit is the source of all those gifts and talents and character traits that promote the “common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). (Note that while Paul speaks only of “gifts” in Romans 12, not gifts “of the Spirit” as in 1 Corinthians 12, the tone, content, and context of the discussion makes clear that Paul is talking about the same thing in both passages.)

The point of the discussion with your group should not be to debate or to put down particular views but rather to announce the good news: that the Spirit is given to all who believe in Christ, that all are equipped and called to serve God and love one another in the name of Jesus. Once this point has been made, ask any who would like to do so to share in what ways they might have experienced the Holy Spirit. Lead the conversation in ways that help people give thanks for the individual gift of each, making sure that no one’s gift is denied or diminished.

- 2. After discussing other spiritual gifts, Paul goes on to speak of a “still more excellent way”—the gift of love (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13). If you have heard or read this passage, what has it meant to you? How does it contribute to our discussion of the experience of the Holy Spirit?**

Most, perhaps, will have heard 1 Corinthians 13 (the “love chapter”) at weddings. Let people share these or other experiences. The words are certainly appropriate at weddings, reminding us that the “love” that abides is the love that is “patient” and “kind” and that “bears all things.” The model is the self-giving love of Christ himself. The Bible recognizes erotic love, too, as a good gift of God, but that is not the primary meaning of the kind of love (Greek *agape*) described in this passage.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul regards this self-giving love as a gift of the Spirit of God—indeed, as the Spirit’s “most excellent” gift. Of all the gifts of the Spirit, those that “abide” are faith, hope, and love. These are the most important aspects of Christian faith and life. They are the gifts that most fully build up the church and serve the common good. With these gifts, the Spirit creates in the church models of Christ himself—those who lose themselves for the sake of others.

- 3. According to Acts 2:37, all who are baptized in the name of Jesus receive the forgiveness of sins and “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” If you have been baptized, how do you think the Spirit has been working in your life?**

As always, allow people freedom to speak without “correction” and without domination by one or several persons. If some are unsure of their answer, remind them of the great variety of gifts referred to in the previous questions. Above all, remind them of the gifts of faith, hope, and love. How have these been present for them? How have they been able to serve “the common good”? As appropriate, lead your group in prayer, giving thanks for the Spirit’s presence in their lives and asking for a greater outpouring of the Spirit among them and in your congregation.

If some have not been baptized, you might remind them, as Jesus said, that “the wind [or Spirit] blows where it chooses” (John 3:8), which certainly implies that God is present among all people—Christians and non-

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Christians alike. At the same time, in that same biblical passage, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to be baptized. Perhaps any in your group who are not baptized are also hearing that invitation. Encourage them to speak with the pastor about this.

Part Three: Signs of the Spirit

“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

Discussion Questions

1. Think of the ways that we speak of “spirit.” We can encourage “school spirit,” but we can also be frightened by the “evil spirits” in a horror movie. Where is the Holy Spirit in all this? How can we “test the spirits” (1 John 1:4)?

Let people share experiences and discuss ways in which the notion of “spirit” or “spirits” can be positive or negative. Have a full-sized dictionary at hand to remind folks of the many ways in which these terms can be used—again, both good and bad. Since “spirit” is a “vital principle” or “supernatural essence,” the term fits the Holy Spirit, but “spirits” can also be “malevolent.” This is why John urges that Christians should “not believe every spirit.” Faith is one thing; gullibility is another! In the Bible, as in life, it is not always easy to distinguish good spirits and bad spirits—both often claim religious respectability. The test of whether or not a “spirit” is from the Holy Spirit is whether or not it “confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh”—or, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 12:3, that “Jesus is LORD.” In other words, the test of the spirits (or the sign of the Holy Spirit) is the gospel. These confessions involve not merely saying words, which anyone can do, they bear witness to the whole life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, and all that that means. This is where the Holy Spirit is at work. This is where good “spirits” are at work and are produced. To speak of “Jesus” (even to say “Jesus is LORD”) in ways that produce mistrust and division or fear and hatred is not confessing the Jesus of the gospel. Testing the spirits is necessary, not to condemn some, but to set everyone free and to make sure the gospel is heard always as good news.

2. “The fruit of the Spirit,” says the Bible, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Imagine a church marked by such things! What would it look like? What would people be doing?

This, of course, is a mind experiment that encourages people to envision the people of God as God means them to be. Let the conversation go as long as it is lively or as time permits. Urge members of the group to be specific about what kinds of things, large or small, might be going on in such a church. Ask also about what these people (as “church”) would be doing outside of “church” (as building or worship time)? Ask people how they might contribute to making or participating in such a church. These “fruits” can only be grown by God, of course—but Christians can surely give themselves more fully to developing their gifts.

If some express regret about the “real” state of the church as they know it, remind them that Christians remain both saint and sinner, that the church is for sinners and not an “ideal” community. Urge them to pray, even now, for forgiveness and renewal of life—for themselves and all God’s people.

3. George Macdonald, a Christian poet, wrote, “Faith opens all the windows to God’s wind.” Talk about how you hear these words and what they mean to you.

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There is, obviously, no right or wrong response here. The play on “God’s wind” and “God’s Spirit” is certainly deliberate for Macdonald. The refreshing and enlarging image of opening windows in a stifling room is delightful and suggests what the presence of God’s Spirit feels like. “All the windows” are opened—not just those that look in certain directions or on familiar sights. New things will happen when God’s Spirit blows in. Macdonald’s poetic line is something like Jesus’ invitation: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:20). God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit always invite; the party is always waiting. God’s word awakens our faith, and we open the door to all God’s good gifts. (If people want to read Macdonald’s entire poem, it is found in *George Macdonald, Diary of an Old Soul: 366 Writings for Devotional Reflection* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965] page 81.)

The open window or open door theme can provide a good close to this discussion of “Experiencing God” or to our conversation about our “search for God”—a temporary close, to be sure, for the search and the conversation will never end. Read together Matthew 7:7-11 and renew for people Christ’s promise that “everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”