

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

BY BISHOP KURT F. KUSSEROW

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP BOOK STUDY

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Welcome to the Small Group Study Guide for *What is the Gospel?* by Kurt F. Kusserow, Bishop of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

What is the Gospel? is an invitation to “rekindle a passion for the Gospel.” We are invited to walk together in a community to share, to discuss, and to connect through prayer, conversation, and ideas, in the hope that you will...

Bring your kindling, whatever it is, and place it carefully on each of these chapters; kneel down in your spirit and invite the Holy Spirit through prayer to accompany you with steady, holy breath. My prayer is that a passion for the Gospel catches fire anew in you and in your community of faith.

+Kurt

What is the Gospel? is a collection of short writings addressing the many aspects of what makes the Gospel so rich and important in learning the Story of Jesus. This supplemental guide may serve as a small group study for confirmands, a study for adults who are interested in learning even more about the Gospel, or as serves your specific needs.

Since this guide walks through the text by chapter, it is recommended that you have access to a copy of the book as you work through the guide. The book is available in three formats: paperback, Kindle, or a free PDF download at swpasynod.org/gospel. This free offering is intended for congregation use to study and share this book without financial barriers; the file may not be shared or reproduced for additional purposes without permission. Page numbers referenced in this guide correlate with the paperback format of the book; for Kindle and PDF versions, please refer to the appropriate chapter to find the correct page.

Tips for using this guide:

1. Discussion questions are offered at the end of each chapter in the book. The questions guide conversation about the chapter's reading selection. The leader may ask some or all of the questions.
2. The questions are designed to be open-ended. There are no “right answers.” Discussions are to be considered expressions of the participants' experience with the text and topic, drawing out ideas and prompting further discussions.
3. There are 10 chapters with varied points of focus on the Gospel. Leaders can determine which chapters meet the needs of the group: address one each week or cover two chapters in each session for five weeks. Use as appropriate for your group. Each session should last approximately 45-60 minutes.
4. Leaders should have read the guide and reviewed the chapter and questions in the book prior to presenting the information to others.

Spiritual Practice: Dwelling in the Word

Dwelling in the Word is a practice to be used at the beginning of each session to prepare our hearts and minds for learning. **Dwelling in the Word**¹ is a spiritual practice that may be used to help in communal discernment. It is an intentional practice...hopefully, a habit, which involves:

- Reflection
- Deep listening to God's Word and to one another
- Patience
- Faith...that God will be revealed and the Holy Spirit will guide us

Begin with prayer.

One person reads the **Dwelling in the Word** scripture aloud from the Bible. These are connected to the chapter learning and are listed in each session's guide in a box.

Reflect silently for about 30 seconds.

Pair up participants to discuss:

1. What captured your attention or imagination?
2. Each participant should listen for key points as their partner shares. Take 2 to 3 minutes each to share. Report your partner's answers and thoughts to the larger group. This is the deep listening part—try not to express your own thoughts, but rather those of your partner. (Alternative: If the group is larger or time is short, limit the sharing to two pairs or adjust as works for you).

Reflect as a group:

What might God be up to in this passage we shared today?

¹ <https://www.elca.org/Future-Directions/The-Process/Dwelling>

Chapter 1: Why Ask the Question?

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read **Dwelling in the Word** and become comfortable with the practice as described on page 3.
Pre-read Chapter 1: Why Ask the Question? and Conversation Starters in the book.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper for participants
- Pens or pencils for notetaking
- Bibles
- Copies of the Note-catcher page (Appendix B of this guide) for each attendee. Attendees should bring this handout to each session.

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions. Distribute materials (2 minutes).
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (10 minutes). Offer the following directions to participants:
 - a. The scripture will be read aloud. As you hear the words or read along in your Bible, reflect on what captures your attention or imagination? We will then be still for 1 to 1-1/2 minutes to silently reflect.
 - b. We will turn to another person and reflect upon our ideas and what stood out to us within the scripture that was read.
 - c. As your partner shares, listen deeply for key points. Switch turns and listen deeply (1-2 minutes).
 - d. Finally, we will listen as 2 or 3 persons share what their partners offered.
 - e. Thank all for sharing and participating.

Scripture for introduction of the practice: **Dwelling in the Word**

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

3. **Activity:** Ask the participants to use a “quick write” for one minute that addresses their present answer to the question “*What is the Gospel?*” No need to share those writings.
4. **Key points and activities:**
 - a. The Gospel is not the story *about* Jesus; it is the story *of* Jesus. What is the significance of making the distinction between the wording “about Jesus” and “of Jesus?”
 - b. Bishop Kusserow mentions “a lively tension of a paradox” between the following:
 - the Gospel is the one true story of God’s gift of life and love and welcome for all, embodied in the one living person of Jesus Christ; and

- the Gospel story lives in and is told by many different people, each struggling daily with facing the truth about themselves and their own ability to love and welcome others.
- What do you see as the paradox? Is it possible for this tension to be resolved?

5. **Conversation Starters:**

- Ask the following question from the Conversation Starter in the book: Did the insights and claims of this chapter seem pretty obvious and basic to you? [Ready to go!] Or did these introductory steps already make you feel in over your head? [Ready to learn!]
- Ask participants to ponder how they would answer the starter question. Then, upon your prompt, have participants give a thumbs up for “basic and ready to go” or a thumbs down for “ready to learn.” [This information can help the leader determine how quickly you can move through the content and discussion of the materials.]

6. **Closure:**

- Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering. Invite them to bring a crucifix to the next gathering. (See Chapter 2, *Gather the following materials*)
- Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
- Dismissal

Chapter 2: The Gospel is the Story of Jesus

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below) and become comfortable with the practice.

Pre-read Chapter 2: The Gospel is the Story of Jesus and Conversation Starters.

Gather the following materials:

- A picture of Christ crucified. Google “Christ Crucified Velazquez” pulled up on a screen or a similar image, or participants could use a personal crucifix from a necklace or a wall cross
- A timer (preference is a phone set to a soft chime)
- Paper for participants
- Pens or pencils for notetaking
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for newcomers. Distribute materials (2 minutes).
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 2: The Gospel is the Story of Jesus.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

3. Key Points and Activities:

- a. The Gospel is written according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of them is presented as “the Gospel.” “The Gospel is the story of Jesus, and Jesus is one person, so the Gospel is one story.” Explain your interpretation of what that statement means.
- b. Activity (see page 10): Read 1 Corinthians 1:17, “*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.*”
- c. Offer an image of the Crucifixion large enough for all to see clearly. Participants can also use a necklace or wall cross with the crucifix.
- d. As you engage with this experience, think about “How is the disastrous result of human willfulness shown to you in this artist’s work?” and “How is the inexhaustible will of God to save found in what you see or feel?”
- e. Set a timer for 2 minutes. Invite participants to “just look.” Let your eyes, or fingers, if using an object, “listen” for the artist’s telling of the story of Jesus.
- f. Ask two or more participants to share the experience.

- g. The Bishop has suggested that this meditative experience could be communicated by sharing with others, writing a poem, or a song so that you tell the story.
4. **Conversation Starters:**
- a. Divide participants into pairs. Assign the first two starters to the first group, the second two to the second group, and so on. Alternatively, you can use any configuration that fits your group size or idea. Have the pairs discuss their assigned Conversation Starters. As time permits, ask participants to share their findings.
5. **Closure:**
- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
 - b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
 - c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
 - d. Lead the group in The Lord's Prayer.
 - e. Dismissal

Chapter 3: The Gospel is the Power of God for Salvation

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 3: The Gospel is the Power of God for Salvation and Conversation Starters.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions. Distribute materials (2 minutes).
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for Dwelling in the Word, Chapter 3: The Gospel is the Power of God for Salvation

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Romans 1:16-17

3. Key Points and Activities:

- a. In the book on page 13, II Corinthians 12:9 is quoted as "[God's] power is made perfect through weakness." What does that statement mean to you? What is it about the power of God that it is made *perfect* in weakness?
- b. The power of God that is made perfect in weakness is not the power to control or conquer; nor is it exactly the power to inspire or the power to move us emotionally, but it is the power to save.
- c. Ask participants to share what they believe "salvation" or "being saved" means in the common language of today. The Bishop states that "the power to love people who have gotten lost from each other, and even from themselves, and to bring them back into mutual relationships of trust and respect with each other and with God" is *the power to save*.
- d. It is easy to love people who are lovable. Sit quietly for 2 minutes, eyes closed and meditate on someone who is not so lovable that seems to have "gotten lost." How might God's love be displayed in your relationship with that person? The Bishop writes, "God's love for people who are lost, a love embodied in Jesus, is a love that suffers rejection and abuse and insult and scorn, even shameful crucifixion and death, and yet loves in return."
- e. Faith is defined as the specific change that happens in us when the story of the Gospel catches our attention. Exodus 3:1-6, the story of Moses turning aside to see the burning bush, is an example that could be used to expand on this idea. The Bishop offers examples on page 14 about this change experience. Ask participants to reflect about their experiences of change as you read aloud the following from the book:

If the wondrously powerful delicacy of a snowflake inspires you in any way, it has changed you. If the emotionally powerful gesture of a small child offering to help moves your heart at all, it has changed you. When we hear the story of Jesus, and it moves us, when we find we can't get away from it, when the story fills our imagination and draws us in to learn more about Jesus, we can say that faith is being created in us.

4. **Conversation Starters**

- a. We read about what inspires us, moves our heart, and moves us often when we see delicate things, those in need, or something we feel is weak. Relating to your experience, why do you believe that is so? How does hearing the story of Jesus move you in this way? What catches your attention?
- b. Ask the questions within the book (page 15) and discuss the topic of the Power of Love found in Jesus.
- c. Consider discussing the concept of “returning love for hate” and how one can do so in a personal, church, local, or global setting.

5. **Closure**

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord's Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 4: The Gospel is Inherently Elusive

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 4: The Gospel is Inherently Elusive and Conversation Starters.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions. Distribute materials (2 minutes).
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for Dwelling in the Word, Chapter 4: The Gospel is Inherently Elusive

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30-31

3. Key Points and Activities:

- a. The Story of Jesus is a living thing.
- b. The gospel happens in the telling and the hearing of the story of Jesus among people who are engaged with each other in a particular place and time.
- c. Author Robert Jenson writes, “The gospel is not a book. Nor is it the whole body of what believers may at any time suppose to be true. Most surely it is not a set of moral standards or commands, however exalted. The gospel is what it is.” The Bishop adds, “The Gospel is not a commodity to be possessed, or intellectual property to be copyrighted, or even a moral standard or command to be followed. It is a living story, for it is the story of Jesus, who is a living person.” (page 18)²
- d. The gospel is like a road trip where the travel is sometimes more fun than the destination. The pursuit of the goal is the learning experience. Another analogy is like trying to chase and hold a greased pig. You catch it and it’s gone again—it is elusive. Our work is to seek for understanding, to pursue the message, to be in on-going engagement and interaction. The whole point is not to get the story exactly right but to tell it in a way that creates faith.

4. Conversation Starters

- a. Ask the questions in the book (page 19) and discuss the topic of the gospel’s elusive nature.
- b. “The Gospel is not a commodity to be possessed, or intellectual property to be copyrighted, or even a moral standard or command to be followed. It is a living story, for it is the story of Jesus, who is a living person.” What does that mean to you?

² Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus*, Fortress Press, 1973. p. 2.

- c. Is it ok to let the gospel just be what it is? Do you find yourself wanting to control it? What challenges do you face in trying to “get your head around” the gospel as a living thing?

5. **Closure**

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 5: The Gospel is the Gift of Life

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 5: The Gospel is the Gift of Life and Conversation Starters.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles
- Large Paper/Markers or White Board/Markers

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 5: The Gospel is the Gift of Life

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 1:14-15

3. **Key Points and Activities:**

- a. Is there a gospel before Jesus's death and resurrection? Ask participants to describe what "Gospel" meant before there was Jesus's incarnation, death, and resurrection. Possible response: The story of Jesus, the Gospel, began before the very first acts of creation as evidenced by John 1:1-4: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."
- b. The gift of life encompasses everything we know and can imagine.
- c. Luther offers Romans 1:1-4 as the Gospel in a "nutshell."
- d. Read aloud: The Gospel Story: launched in the first act of creation, glimpsed in the stories of the children of Israel, longed-for in the Psalms, anticipated by the prophets, accomplished in Christ Jesus, expounded upon by the early Christian writers, and harbored as hope in the hearts of believers today_(page 22).

4. **Conversation Starters**

- a. Write this statement on a large paper or on a white board. "Gospel: the good news of the kingdom of God, that the One who gives the gift of life expansively, personally, redemptively, and eternally has come to you today." Walk through the statement and discuss

- the meaning of each of the words that are underlined. What does this specific word mean within the context of this sentence? How does it pertain to the Gospel being the gift of life?
- b. Ask the questions within the book (page 23).
 - c. Read John 3:16 from the Bible. Ask question 3 (page 23): What do you think and feel when you see the “John 3:16” sign held up between the goal posts at a football game?
5. **Closure**
- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
 - b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
 - c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
 - d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
 - e. Dismissal

Chapter 6/Part A: The Gospel is Being Forgiven

Chapter 6 is divided into two parts. Part A focuses on the question of sin. Part B will focus on what it means to be forgiven.

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 6: The Gospel is Being Forgiven. NOTE: This is a chapter of “big” concepts and ideas. This discussion could easily divert to other topics. As a leader, you can decide where the focus should be to ensure that the message is delivered.

The Bible Project Video Resource: bibleproject.com/explore/video/khata-sin/ The Bible Project video (5:43 runtime) explains “Khata/Sin” and may be shown at the beginning of this lesson or as a culminating activity to help build understanding.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles
- Video display options (e.g., laptop projected to screen; smart TV with access to internet)

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 6/Part A: The Gospel is Being Forgiven

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 1:8-10

3. **Key Points and Activities:**

- a. Ask participants to define “sin.” List those ideas and recognize that participants will likely offer the things we do or neglect to do (e.g., I didn’t go to my neighbor’s funeral; I argued with my neighbor; I exaggerated on my tax return).
- b. Sin is a word that is meant to be a shorthand way of referring to a deeply complex and pervasive human experience. We are stuck in this space under the influence of the human condition. We can’t do enough right to not sin. We are immersed in sin as a condition of being human. Ask participants if this is a difference in what they thought about sin?

- c. In our scriptural reading we read “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” With the understanding of our sin as a human condition, how has the meaning of that text changed for you as it relates to your list or your past conception of sin?
- d. Review the bulleted items on page 24 of the book. The human condition is an experience of:
 - i. *Futility*, it’s a futile effort, in other words a losing battle. Like “whack a mole,” you bop the head of one and two more pop up!
 - ii. *Tragedy*, when we try to do the right thing and just make it worse. Like when we just keep talking to try to explain ourselves, but we are really just digging the hole deeper!
 - iii. *Finitude*, no matter how mightily we struggle, all good things come to an end. For example, the end of the life of a pet who we have loved and deeply cared for through health and in sickness.
 - iv. *Self-defeating willfulness*, our natural tendency toward stubbornness and to focus on what WE want and when we become forceful in this attempt to get things our way, we make achieving that thing impossible.
- e. How are you stuck in the “human condition?” Is there a way out of this sinful nature? (Yes, our next section, Part B, will address that question.)

4. Conversation Starters

- a. This chapter is divided into two sections. Part A, addresses questions 1 and 2 (page 17).
- b. Share and discuss question 1. Does it make sense to you to talk about “the human condition?” How do you experience the context, climate, or setting of human life?
- c. If there is time for question 2, consider having participants list what used to be considered a “sin” in biblical times (e.g., eating certain foods). What was considered a “sin” 100 years ago (e.g., women wearing pants, working on Sunday). If these things can be changed by humans, are they really sins?

5. Closure

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 6/Part B: The Gospel is Being Forgiven

Chapter 6 is divided into two parts. Part A focused on the question of sin. Part B focuses on what it means to be forgiven.

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 6: The Gospel is Being Forgiven. NOTE: This is a chapter of “big” concepts and ideas. This discussion could easily divert to other topics. As a leader, you can decide where the focus should be to ensure that the message is delivered.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 6/Part B: The Gospel is Being Forgiven

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Matthew 26: 27-28

3. Key Points and Activities:

- f. Begin with a brief review of Part A and the learning/discussion about sin. Share that because of the “human condition,” we will find an avenue through which we can be forgiven within this part of Chapter 6.
- g. Ask participants to reflect on the worship service and note if there are any instances that the word “forgiveness” is presented in our confessions or our prayers, etc.
- h. During worship we offer the confession: “we are in bondage (or captive) to sin and cannot free ourselves.” What does *in bondage to sin* mean? Even with our best efforts, we are caught up in our human environment...you can’t win! Not sinning is an effort of futility (see page 24).
- i. Also in worship, the pastor offers the Lord’s absolution, “In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of your sins.” What are you thinking or feeling at this time in the worship service?
- j. We also experience forgiveness in the Eucharist: “This is the new covenant in his blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.”

- k. Harkening back to the previous chapter on “gifts,” since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift.” Justified means that we have been forgiven of any sin because of our faith in Christ. It is the removing of the penalty of sin by grace and, thereby, being put into right relationship with God and other people; the unrighteous become righteous or are set in “rightness.”
- l. In Christ’s forgiveness, we are dismissed from the human condition of sin.
- m. Through our relationship with Christ, forgiveness brings release from the power and control of i-iv below and are brought into a new relationship of mutual love, respect, and freedom (referencing pages 24-25):
 - i. Futility to purpose (read/review/discuss page 26, paragraph 3);
 - ii. Tragedy resolves in serendipity (i.e., a happy chance, an unplanned fortunate happening) (paragraph 5);
 - iii. Finitude is reborn into a resurrection life (paragraph 4); and
 - iv. Self-defeating willfulness to self-giving love (page 27, paragraph 1).
- n. Ask participants to reflect upon evidence of this transformation through Christ in their lives. (These may be personal and, therefore, do not need to be shared unless participants feel moved to do so.)

4. Conversation Starters

- o. The discussion questions (page 27) that are focused on Part B include question 3 through 7. Focus on questions 3 through 5, adding 6 and 7 as time permits.

Leader background:

On page 25, (paragraph 4), a treatise by Martin Luther is mentioned that explains the “happy exchange” mentioned in question 4. Read this paragraph if answering question 4 to build understanding prior to addressing the question.

On page 25, (paragraphs 4 and 5), the concept of “marriage” is used to describe how forgiveness works and “divorce” as a way to show our separation from the human condition of sin. Heed footnote #28 offering a need for great care in the use of this metaphor.

5. Closure

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 7: The Gospel is Welcome

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 7: The Gospel is Welcome and Conversation Starters.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Text for **Dwelling in the Word** in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship Book (ELW).

Thanksgiving at the Table

Holy, mighty, and merciful Lord, heaven and earth are full of your glory.

In great love you sent to us Jesus, your Son, who reached out to heal the sick and suffering, who preached good news to the poor, and who, on the cross, opened his arms to all.

ELW 65

3. Key Points and Activities:

- a. Invite participants to write a list of synonyms for the word “all.” Some examples: the whole of, each of, each one, every one, the entire, in totality, entirety, complete, total full, utter, all-out, greatest, maximum, everything, the whole amount, fully, thoroughly, in every respect.
- b. Does our church really mean “all” when we say, “all are welcome here,” “all are invited to participate,” or “all will be included?”
- c. The story of Jesus is a story of open arms. What does that mean to you?
- d. Ask participants to recall the “I love you this much” gesture and show with open arms the amount of love you have for a specific person in your family. Arms should be as wide as possible. Now show us with your arms how much Jesus loves you. This is evidence that it is impossible to show how very much He loves us as it is beyond our open arms.
- e. Jesus said, “Come to me, **all** you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). What does “all” mean to you using the synonyms you expressed in point “a” above.
- f. The gospel in one word is “welcome.” How can “welcome” be displayed within you and your church?
- g. The gospel is the unrestrained embrace of one who cannot imagine receiving such a gift because he knows that he does not deserve it.

- h. Consider the following (page 30): “The problem with inviting Jesus into your heart is that we will want to bring his friends with him, and they are sinners and tax collectors.”
 - i. The trouble we encounter with the unconditional welcome that Jesus extends to us is that he extends it also to people we find odd, uninteresting, unappealing, even odious. How do we, like Jesus, open our arms to all? Does your welcome come with strings attached?
 - j. What is the difference between loving all people and affirming or agreeing with people? Is there a difference? How do we love and welcome people in Christ who we don’t agree with or who have different views than us? What guidance do we have from the Story of Jesus that may guide us in the ability to “open our arms to all?”
4. **Conversation Starters**
- a. Ask the questions within the book (page 32) and discuss the topic of the “Welcome” as time allows.
 - b. As per question 5, are there people you could not bear to welcome into the space defined by your open arms? How about the church’s open arms? What ways can “welcome to all” be improved within your church? What actions would have to occur to bring that to fruition?
5. **Closure**
- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
 - b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
 - c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
 - d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
 - e. Dismissal

Chapter 8: The Gospel is for the Poor

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 8: The Gospel is for the Poor

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 8: The Gospel is for the Poor

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them [get Gospelized]. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Luke 7:21-23

3. Key Points and Activities:

- a. Prompt a brief discussion by asking, what does "poor" mean in the United States? What does "rich" or "wealthy" mean in the United States? Is being rich different than being wealthy? Make a note of the ideas that participants share.
- b. The church is growing more rapidly in the poorest countries of the world, while in the world's wealthiest countries, the church continues to diminish relative to the population. Brainstorm some ideas on why that may be so. What does richness or wealth have to do with attending church? What does poverty have to do with attending church?
- c. Write the following words on paper (or ask participants to write them on their own papers): blind, lame, lepers, deaf, dead, poor. Ask participants to write the remedy for these conditions. Share the responses they offer:
Blind-sighted; lame-mobile/walking; lepers-clean/healed; deaf/hearing;
dead/alive...for poor most will write rich. But, offer that they consider the word "gospel."
The gospel is the remedy for the poor. The poor are those "who know their need of God." As it is written in James 2:5: "Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom?"
- d. We take for granted those things we have until they are lost or gone. During COVID, we all became "poor" in our ability to communicate, to meet and gather, to hug and hold those we

love that didn't live with us. We know from our experience with COVID about the awareness of change and loss. What were some of the striking changes that affected you most of all during the COVID shutdown? How did it make you "poor?" (This question refers to your spiritual needs, such as social isolation, no hugs from people, far too many Zoom calls.) What toll was taken and how have you been restored? How has the church dealt with this experience, in your view?

- e. Can we hold onto "poor" and "Gospel" strongly enough that we begin to see how they are related? On page 36, the Bishop writes, "The darkness of mental anguish, depression, and grief leads the stricken heart to cry out, 'O, God! O, God! O, God!' and mean it. That is, 'I need something, someone not stuck in the human condition; something, someone who cares, who gives life, who forgives, who welcomes, because nothing I am and nothing I have will do it.'" If all this is what we mean by *poor*, then *Gospel* is most certainly the remedy.

4. Conversation Starters

- a. Ask the questions in the book (page 32) and discuss the topic, the Gospel is for the poor.
- b. Read Mark 10:17-31 to address question 5: "Does thinking about Gospel and poverty in this way help make sense out of things Jesus said about the relationship of wealth and the kingdom of heaven? Is being wealthy unbiblical?"

5. Closure

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord's Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 9: The Gospel is Love

Note: This session addresses sensitive issues. Be aware of those who may be affected.

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 9: The Gospel is Love.

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles
- A device to play a YouTube Video (e.g., laptop or projected to a TV) or a recording of the hymn #343 My Song is Love Unknown, available on most music sites (e.g., Spotify, iTunes).
- Queue up the video [youtube.com/watch?v=bWRcAa-nFIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWRcAa-nFIA) or music.
- Print a handout for each participant of Appendix A in this guide: *My Song is Love Unknown* lyrics.

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for newcomers. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 9: The Gospel is Love

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

Galatians 2:19-20

3. Key Points and Activities

- a. Familiar love can be petty, and it can be profound, but Gospel love, “Love unknown” is something else all together. The Bishop mentions various types of love:
 - i. Reactive love—an expression of personal interest (e.g., I love art!).
 - ii. Relational love—engaged in reciprocal relationship that moves us from self-interest into self-giving (e.g., I love my friends).
 - iii. Gospel love—a creative act; to create new and lovely life out of the very things that disrespect life, that diminish and destroy it, that lead inexorably to death.
- b. Distribute handout Appendix A to participants. Watch *My Song is Love Unknown* on YouTube (lyrics are included). This runs 4:43 minutes. Stop after one or two verses as many will recall the hymn **OR** listen to the hymn from a recording. **OR**, if you know the tune, join in full voice and sing the first verse or two using the hymnal for the lyrics or from Appendix A!
- c. Reflect upon the lyrics of the first two verses (see Appendix A for lyrics). What stands out to you as it relates to Gospel love? What differentiates Gospel love from familiar love (e.g., reactive or relational love)?

- d. Read **II Corinthians 5:17** aloud: “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.” Reflect on what the passage is telling us. “All in Christ” and “everything old” both reference the broader perspective.

Now Read **Galatians 2:19-20**: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Reflect on what the passage is telling us. Why do you think the love of God “leads the sinner it loves to crucifixion?”

4. Conversation Starters

- a. Ask the questions in the book (page 41) and discuss the topic, The Gospel is Love.
- b. Focus on question 4: “Saul’s life was changed by the Gospel (see Galatians 1:11-24 and Acts 9:1-22), and after a while, he became known as Paul (Acts 13:9).” Was Saul’s life saved or lost in that event?
- c. Turn to page 6 in the book. Read the following:

And it is also a sobering thing. For the story of Jesus invites people into the way of Jesus, which is a path that leads through death to life. But since it is so deeply ingrained in our nature to avoid death at every turn, we carry within us an almost irresistible tendency to re-shape the Gospel into a story that will lead us to life without first having to walk through suffering and death! This ever-present threat is why we ask the questions, once again, “What is the Gospel?”

If we can change the Gospel into a way that we can avoid suffering and death, then why did Jesus have to die? Through Christ, all of my will is removed, we are exposed to agony and suffering. When we are renewed, we die to our old self and are a new creation. What does this mean to you?

5. Closure

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in The Lord’s Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Chapter 10: What Makes the Gospel True?

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read Chapter 10: What Makes the Gospel True?

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Chapter 10: What Makes the Gospel True?

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

John 4:39-42

3. Key Points

- a. What is the "Gospel truth?" The Bishop characterizes "Gospel truth" as "actual personal experience that is not presumed to be shared by others and a matter general enough in nature that it is actually accessible to others." That is, Gospel truth is both a personal experience and something that others can verify for themselves.
- b. What is "my truth?" And how is that different from Gospel truth? Read Genesis 3:12-13: "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate it.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'"
- c. "My truth" can be used to cover for our sins as Adam and Eve did.
- d. Read the following aloud and listen for how they reflect Gospel truth.
 - i. Read John 1:14—And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and **truth**.
 - ii. Read John 18:37—For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the **truth**.
 - iii. Read John 14:6—Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the **truth**, and the life."

What personal experiences can you identify in the voices behind these texts? What is accessible to others (including us) to verify?

Two main points: Gospel truth is not a data point or a fact or even a documentable event but a relationship. Gospel truth is the leap from an inherited faith to a personally owned faith, as the narrative from John 4 records.

- e. What makes the Gospel true is when the written biblical narrative and personal, lived experience find agreement, the truth of each being validated in the other. That has actually been found to happen, one generation after another, all over the world. And it is the goal of this book that you may come to know the story of Jesus as the Gospel truth (page 45).

4. **Conversation Starters**

Ask the questions with in the book (page 45) and discuss the topic, What Makes the Gospel True?

5. **Closure**

- a. Note-Catcher: Write a statement or short paragraph on your learning or take-away from each chapter as it is experienced.
- b. Thank all participants for their active engagement and extend the invitation to meet again and provide the date, time, and location.
- c. Remind participants to read the chapters ahead of time in preparation for the next gathering.
- d. Lead the group in 'The Lord's Prayer.
- e. Dismissal

Afterword: With You in Christ

Estimated Time: 45-60 minutes

Preparation:

Pre-read scripture for **Dwelling in the Word** (below).

Pre-read the Afterword: With You in Christ

Gather the following materials:

- Paper
- Pencils/Pens
- Bibles

Leader Guide:

1. **Welcome** all in attendance. Make introductions for new participants. Distribute materials.
2. **Dwelling in the Word.** (See page 3.) Learning and experiencing the practice (5-10 minutes).

Scripture for **Dwelling in the Word**, Afterward: With You in Christ

The Supremacy of Christ

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Colossians 1:15-23

Reflect upon each of the above paragraphs of scripture separately. Notice that the first paragraph reflects “He” and the second begins “you.” The story of Jesus is the concentrated version of God’s created and redeeming work that is eternally being done in all the world and among all the human family, made visible to us in one person through the lens of one branch of the human family. But what we see in Jesus is true for all the world (page 48).

3. Key Ideas and activities

- a. Review the Note Catcher page (Appendix B) with the summary statements of “take-away” learnings from this study to view our path along the way.
- b. The Bishop offers the question: What do we see in Jesus? Reflecting upon the whole of this study, our learning, and time together in the Word, the scripture in this Afterward (Colossians 1:15-23), and your personal experiences, reflect on the question “What do I see in Jesus?”
- c. To prompt discussion consider offering the Bishop’s response to this question: “I see in Jesus God’s never-ending love. I find God’s love in Jesus to be most visible to me in those times when my own wisdom and strength fail me, and that seems to happen most often when I am trying my best to do good and useful things!” (page 48).
- d. Throughout this series, a collection of final thoughts have been gathered (see Appendix B Note-Catcher). If these were collected, ask participants to share the one summary statement that they believe they will hold on to beyond this learning experience. What makes this one particularly meaningful for you?

4. Closure

Thinking through the Lord’s Prayer:

- a. Invite the participants to close their eyes; slowly take a deep breath.
- b. Leader-read the Lord’s Prayer pausing after each statement for 5-7 seconds as follows:

Our Father, who art in heaven, (pause)

Hallowed be thy name. (pause)

Thy kingdom come, (pause)

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (pause)

Give us this day our daily bread; (pause)

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
(pause)

And lead us not into temptation, (pause)

But, deliver us from evil. (pause)

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever (pause)

Amen

- c. Dismissal

Appendix A

My Song is Love Unknown (Public Domain)

My song is love unknown, my savior's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be,
Oh, who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

He came from his blest throne salvation to bestow;
The world that was his own would not its Savior know.
But, oh my friend, my friend indeed, who at my need his life did spend!

Sometimes we strew his way and his sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day hosanas to our king.
Then "Crucify!" is all our breath, and for his death we thirst and cry.

We cry out, we will have our dear Lord made away,
A murderer to save, the prince of life to slay.
Yet cheerful he to suffering goes that he his foes from thence might free.

In life no house, no home my Lord on earth might have;
In death no friendly tomb but what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home but mine the tomb wherein he lay.

Here might I stay and sing—no story so divine!
Never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend!

Appendix B

Note-Catcher: Write a statement, short paragraph, or a thought to take-away from each chapter as they are experienced.

Chapter 1:

Chapter 2:

Chapter 3:

Chapter 4:

Chapter 5:

Chapter 6:

Chapter 7:

Chapter 8

Chapter 9:

Chapter 10:

Afterward/Final Thoughts: