

Looking at the Cross

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Meet the Writer

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Boyd has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Augusta, Georgia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, the Logos Program, and the Kerygma Program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently, he is the author of the revised resource book and leader's guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.

Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Crux of the Matter

Scripture

1 Corinthians 1:18–25; Romans 3:21–26; 1 Corinthians 15:1–8;
2 Corinthians 5:14–21; Matthew 27:31–56

Main Idea

At the heart of God’s redemption of the world is the cross of Christ. It is a profound and holy mystery. In the sacrificial death of Jesus, God confronted sin’s power with forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation. At the heart of our faith is the cross of Christ, ultimately a profound and holy mystery.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. Explore the crucial importance of the crucifixion of Jesus in the proclamation of the early church.
2. Discover the central importance of the cross of Christ in the church’s worship.
3. Meditate upon the story of Jesus’ crucifixion as told in the Gospel of Matthew.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Christ candle and lighter

Latin cross

Newsprint and marker

Book of Common Worship

Copies of a worship bulletin or order of worship

Hymnals with the hymn “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”

Leader Prep

Before leading this course, make sure you understand its scope by looking through at the themes, Scriptures, and activities of the six sessions. To prepare for leading each session you will want to read the participant's book, underline its major points, highlight questions to pursue, and note significant insights. Involve the participants throughout the course by inviting them to help with reading the Scriptures, quotations, and prayers.

For Gather, place a Christ candle in the center of your meeting space. If possible, place a Latin cross next to the Christ candle. For Head, write the following questions on a posted sheet of newsprint:

- In what ways does Paul proclaim the cross of Jesus as “vital, crucial, not-to-be-missed, and much to be celebrated”?
- As you look at the cross in Paul's words, what do you see?
- How does Paul understand and interpret the crucifixion of Jesus?
- What effect does Paul's proclamation have upon you? What is the good news?

In addition to the various translations the participants are using, you may want to provide some additional versions, particularly Today's English Version and The Message. Remember to give enough time for the participants to respond to questions, especially those in which they will share something personal. Do not be anxious about moments of silence. Most people need time to think and prepare their thoughts. The Holy Spirit is at work!

In Hands, the story of Jesus' crucifixion as told by Matthew will be read. Recruit one of the participants to read the story to the group at a relaxed pace. The purpose is not to discuss the story but simply to listen to it and meditate upon God's Word.

For Depart, incorporate joys and concerns offered by the participants in the closing prayer. You may wish to recruit an accompanist for the hymn.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Light the Christ candle by reading 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. If available, call the group's attention to the Latin cross. Invite the group's reflection on personal memories of this particular cross. Read together the information about the Latin cross found on p. 46 in the participant's book.

- Dr. Miller writes: “Many people living in our culture have no idea what the Bible teaches about the death of Jesus, and more than a few of them sit in the church. . . . We live in a culture that has removed itself so far from the biblical story that the death of Jesus is often forgotten. Or dismissed.”
- Ask: *In what ways do these words ring true for you? If you were to interpret the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion to a new Christian or one who is seeking faith, where would you start?*
- Pray the prayer in the participant’s book.

Head

- Dr. Miller writes: “So why not scrub the cross clean of blood and gore? Why not de-emphasize the nightmare of Jesus’ crucifixion? Such questions have resonance in certain quarters today. But the apostolic and historic witness of the church moves in exactly the opposite direction. For the earliest followers of Jesus, the cross is vital, crucial, not-to-be-missed, and much to be celebrated.” Invite the group’s comments and insights regarding this statement.
- Form small groups to read and discuss Paul’s proclamation of the good news of Jesus’ cross. Assign one reading to each group and have groups discuss their assigned passage using the posted questions: Romans 3:21–26, 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, or 2 Corinthians 5:14–21.
- Gather together and invite the groups to recount their discoveries.

Heart

- Even though the cross does not appear in Christian art for a few centuries, Dr. Miller writes: “By A.D. 204, the theologian Tertullian said the practice of signing of the cross is encouraged throughout the day: ‘At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign.’” Invite the group’s comments and insights regarding this statement.

- The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Focus on a practice that often takes place during Ash Wednesday worship, placing ashes on the forehead by making the sign of the cross. Read the section “Imposition of Ashes” in the *Book of Common Worship*, particularly the directions provided for the pastor. Have participants recall an experience of being marked with ashes. Ask: *What was the tone or mood of the occasion? Was the mark in the form of the cross? What effect did the experience have on you?*
- Focus on the ways the cross is a central part of our worship. Distribute copies of a recent worship bulletin or order of worship. Ask: *In what ways is the cross of Jesus prominent in the worship service and in the sanctuary? What aspects help worshipers focus on the good news of the cross?*

Hands

- Throughout the season of Lent, the church will be focused on rehearsing the story of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and his final week, Holy Week.
- Read Dr. Miller’s words beginning with “Much more could be added” and concluding with “please, don’t miss this.” Dr. Miller draws attention to the amount each Gospel devotes to telling the story of Jesus’ final week. The first four sessions will provide an opportunity to look at the cross and reflect upon the ways the story of Jesus’ passion is told.
- Read Matthew 27:31–56. Invite the participants to listen closely to the story and visualize it in their minds as it is read. Do not rush through the story. Invite the group’s comments and insights regarding this reading.

Depart

- Join together in a prayer expressing joys and concerns.
- Sing or read together the hymn “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.”
- Extinguish the Christ candle.

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The Crux of the Matter

Scripture

Revelation 1:4–7 In John’s greeting, we have an early Christian witness to Jesus’ person and work. Jesus, the faithful martyr, alive and loose in the world, is sovereign and engaged, ruling over and over-ruling all the authorities of earth. And, as if it were the very heart of the matter, John speaks of Jesus’ love, our sin, and the liberating power of the cross.

Prayer

Almighty God, we live “East of Eden” in a bloody, messy, and broken-down world. Amid the chaos, we hear of a cross standing high, and a voice calls us to draw close and gather beneath it. It looks to be a frightening and anxious place, but those who have been there tell us of good news, of salvation from futility, “not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ . . .” (1 Peter 1:18–19). In your mercy, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to respond to this news of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. Amen.

Introduction

Imagine a friend asks you to lunch the morning of Good Friday. “Ah, sorry,” you say, “I’m headed to a worship service at our church that starts at noon today.” “Really?” says your friend. “On Friday, you’re going to worship?” “Yeah,” you say with a smile. “It’s Good Friday, the day we remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then your friend says, “I’ve often wondered about that. Any chance you could give me the summary version of what Good Friday’s all about?” If you had five minutes to give that summary, where might you begin and what might you say?

Many people living in our culture have no idea what the Bible teaches about the death of Jesus, and more than a few of them sit in the church. Those of us who may know words like *atonement* and *propitiation* find ourselves nonetheless challenged to talk

meaningfully about Jesus' death on the cross, and the difference it makes for us and for the world.

This study is designed to get us thinking and talking about this as we make our way into this Lenten season. Clearly, we live in a culture that has removed itself so far from the biblical story that the death of Jesus is often forgotten. Or dismissed.

Consider the story of a young woman, shopping in a jewelry store, who was interested in buying a necklace with a silver cross. "Which of these appeals to you?" asked the clerk. "Well," she said, "I'm not sure. But I don't think I want one with a little man hanging on it."

Who can blame her for that? It's much more appealing, isn't it, to have a silver cross without a man upon it, a symbol of adornment, rather than the reminder of a nightmare? The notion of death by crucifixion is so barbaric to us that it seems better to leave it locked in the history books, with all the other grisly events that we'd just as soon forget.

The Fear of the Cross

The crucifixion of Jesus has been called "the recurring nightmare of the church." To ponder it is to draw close to a violent, bloody, messy, unspeakably cruel death. The Gospels don't dwell on the anguish of crucifixion, but we know about it in great detail from other sources. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus calls it "*the most wretched of deaths*."¹ In his short book, *Crucifixion*, New Testament scholar Martin Hengel describes in detail what we know about first-century executions on a cross. It's not for the squeamish.

Designed to intensify the fear of opposing Roman imperial authority, crucifixion was both torturous and publicly humiliating. The act itself involved a quick series of events and usually followed a brutal scourging. At the site of crucifixion, the prisoner would be stripped naked, made to lie with his back on the ground, his hands either bound or nailed to the horizontal cross-bar, his feet nailed to the vertical pole. The soldiers would hoist the cross and simply drop it into a hole in the ground. Ridicule from the executioners and others was typical and the tortured criminal could do nothing but gasp for air until he died, sometimes after several days.

The earliest followers of Jesus knew firsthand about such events. Most Jews during the Roman occupation would have seen the cruelty. There are many first-century accounts of Jews being crucified by Roman authorities, sometimes in the hundreds and thousands at

1. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.203.

one time. We know this happened, for example, during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 66–70. As Jewish fugitives attempted to flee the surrounded city, they were captured and crucified, to such an extent that the Romans had trouble finding wood for all the crosses that were needed.

Death by crucifixion was intended to terrorize whole communities into submission before the Roman imperial powers. A crucified rebel, left to squirm in agony on a cross, sends a strong message to other would-be rebels.

So the question is pressed: Why would anyone today want to dwell on this?

Why rehearse all the gore and mayhem surrounding Jesus' death? Why not just put it all behind us, as we do with other nightmares, and seek to move forward?

Read the blogs, check out the chat rooms, and it soon becomes apparent: more than a few struggle with Christian claims about the death of Christ. To some, traditional atonement theories seem to condone violence, or even appear to affirm a form of divine child abuse. One theologian put it this way: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

Death by crucifixion was intended to terrorize whole communities into submission before the Roman imperial powers.

The Apostolic Witness

So why not scrub the cross clean of blood and gore? Why not de-emphasize the nightmare of Jesus' crucifixion? Such questions have resonance in certain quarters today. But the apostolic and historic witness of the church moves in exactly the opposite direction. For the earliest followers of Jesus, the cross is vital, crucial, not to be missed, and much to be celebrated.

Paul, for example, speaks of Christ's death as a matter of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). "We proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23), he claims, and later forcefully states: "I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In Galatians, Paul writes: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14). In his letter to the Romans, he writes about Jesus, "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" (Romans 3:25). The engine room of hope, for Paul, is to be found at the foot of the cross.

We find the same understanding in the other New Testament epistles. In letters of John and Peter, the cross of Christ is frequent

and central. In 1 John 1:7, for example, we're told that "the blood of Jesus . . . cleanses us from all sin." Or take 1 John 2:1–2, "Jesus Christ the righteous . . . is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." It would be hard to make a more daring and inclusive claim of Jesus' death and its significance.

The emphasis at the beginning of 1 Peter is on how God is at work through the Spirit to bring about obedience to Jesus Christ "and to be sprinkled with his blood." Every devout Jew would understand that phrase to describe a death that somehow deals with sin. Elsewhere, the author explicitly focuses on the cross, citing Isaiah 53, "[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24; cf. Isaiah 53:5).

The letter to the Hebrews is essentially an argument for the primacy of Jesus' person and work, and his atoning significance. Sacrifice for sins was at the center of Jewish religious practice. The author of Hebrews, who writes as a Jew to Jews, repeatedly affirms Jesus as the supreme fulfillment of this practice: "And every priest stands day after day at his services, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God'" (Hebrews 10:11–12).

The book of Revelation offers something of an "exclamation mark" to all this. At the very beginning and throughout this apocalyptic writing, Jesus is marked out as the one who "freed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Much more could be added. Indeed, the New Testament as a whole pulsates with this witness to Christ's death and atoning work. But no documents do so more than the four Gospels. These accounts tell the story of Jesus' life, teachings,

the miracles he did, and the response of the crowds and the authorities. However, what is most striking about the Gospels is how intentionally centered they are on the death of Jesus and the events leading up to it.

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pulsates with this witness to
Christ's death and atoning work.*

Consider this: approximately 40 percent of the first three (synoptic) Gospels focus on the last week of Jesus' life. That percentage increases to about 66 percent when we come to the Gospel of John. If the Gospels were simply biographies of the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, we would expect a more balanced treatment of the various seasons of his life. But that is not what we find. A vastly disproportionate focus is given over to the last week of Jesus' life, as if to say, "Whatever else you miss, please, don't miss this."

The Practice of the Church

The church has understood this. For the past two thousand years followers of Christ have placed the cross at the very center of their worship. In the beginning of *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott, an Anglican priest, imagines a non-Christian tourist coming to services at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. As she nears the building, she spots the huge golden cross that sits atop the dome. Upon entering, she observes that the very architecture of the building is cruciform, with its nave and transepts forming the shape of a cross.

As she sits down, the service opens with the entrance of a processional cross, and the congregation begins singing the hymn "Lift High the Cross." Later, people are invited forward to receive the bread and wine, which the minister describes as the body and blood of Christ. She sees the worshipers "signing the cross" on their foreheads and hearts.

At the end, as Stott imagines it, the visitor can be forgiven for wondering, "What are the grounds, and what is the significance, of this concentration on the cross?"²

But this is not a recent phenomenon. This focus on the cross goes back into the earliest centuries of church history. It seems likely the cross as a Christian symbol came into use at least as early as the second century. In fact, Christian leaders had to defend themselves, as early as the second century, against the charge of being worshipers of the cross.³

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By A.D. 204, the theologian Tertullian said the practice of signing of the cross was encouraged throughout the day: "At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign."⁴

2. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 18.

3. See Justin Martyr, "Apologia," i. 55–60; Minucius Felix, "Octavius," xxix.

4. Tertullian, *The Chaplet/De Corona* 3.4.

St. Augustine (c. 354–430) calls upon Christians to stand under the cross and ponder its message and meaning. He invites his readers to join with the women who drew near as Jesus was crucified:

As they were “looking on,” so we too gaze on his wounds as he hangs. We see his blood as he dies. We see the price offered by the Redeemer, touch the scars of his resurrection. He bows his head, as if to kiss you. His heart is made bare open, as it were, in love to you. His arms are extended that he may embrace you. His whole body is displayed for your redemption. Ponder how great these things are. Let all this be rightly weighed in your mind: as he was once fixed to the cross in every part of his body for you, so he may now be fixed in every part of your soul.⁵

The Reformers, as we shall see, elevated this ancient witness and added to it. For Luther “the cross is our only theology.” Calvin calls it “God’s magnificent theater of glory.”

Spiritual Practice

Take a friend out for coffee. Talk about the strange way Christians call the events of that terrible Friday “good.” See if you can each think of a traumatic experience in your life that was somehow “bent to the good” by God’s grace.

Questions for Reflection

Have you ever struggled with the fact that Jesus’ death was somehow necessary to bring about your salvation? What is at the root of this struggle?

If a friend asked you to talk about the basic meaning of Good Friday, how might you begin your response?

Consider the hymnody of the church. What hymns or choruses come to mind that celebrate the cross?

5. Cited in *Mark*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 235.