

The Shared Life of God

Facilitator's Guidebook

As you begin this communal journey through the book, you will discover that the questions offered for discussion are more than your group can cover in one gathering. This is intentional. The guide is meant to provide options, not a checklist.

Rather than trying to use every question, prayerfully choose two or three that you discern will be most beneficial for your group. Let the Spirit, the chapter's central movement, and the needs of the people gathered guide your choices. The goal is not to complete the guide, but to create space for honest reflection, shared conversation, and participation in the life of God. For these sessions, I consider depth more important than coverage.

Introduction and Chapter 1: The Trinity: More Than We Ever Imagined (recommend two sessions)

Session One: Seeing God More Fully

The goal is not to discuss every Scripture, analogy, or theological term in the chapter. Participants have the chapter itself for that. The group gathering should create space to notice, receive, discuss, and practice its central truths.

Session purpose

This session introduces the purpose of the book and invites participants to reconsider the God they have imagined. It explores the biblical witness to Father, Son, and Spirit and helps the group begin seeing the Trinity not as an abstract puzzle, but as the relational life of God.

Central truth

The Trinity is not merely a doctrine about God. It reveals the kind of life God eternally lives and the life into which we are invited.

Key movement

This session moves from: *belief about God* to *attention to the life of God*

Participants are invited to ask not only, “Do I believe in the Trinity?” but also, “What difference does the Trinity make in the way I imagine and experience God?”

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the Introduction and the first half of Chapter 1.
- Reflect on the image of God personally carried during earlier years of faith.
- Choose three or four Trinitarian passages rather than attempting to discuss the entire biblical overview.
- Be prepared to make room for mystery rather than trying to resolve every theological question.
- Remember that some participants may feel embarrassed that they cannot explain the Trinity. Reassure them that the goal is not mastery, but deeper attention and participation.

Suggested stopping point

For a two-session format, Session One could cover the Introduction through “Classic and Creative Analogies.”

Session Two would begin with “Hooked on the Trinity.”

Suggested Scriptures

A strong selection would be:

- Matthew 3:16–17
- John 1:1–5, 14, 18
- John 14:9–11, 16–20
- John 17:20–23
- 2 Corinthians 13:13 or 13:14, depending on translation

The facilitator may invite participants to listen for words such as: **with, in, one, love, glory, dwell, send, share, fellowship**

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and orientation — 10 minutes
- Opening reflection — 10 minutes
- Scripture exploration — 25 minutes
- Mystery and analogies — 20 minutes

- Personal response and prayer — 10 minutes

Opening the study

Read aloud from the Introduction: “The Trinity is not an abstract theological puzzle, but the living heart of Christian faith and formation.”

Then ask:

- What drew you to this study?
- When you hear the word *Trinity*, what first comes to mind?
- Does the Trinity feel meaningful, confusing, distant, familiar, or something else?
- Have you generally thought of theology as something to live, something to understand, or both?

Facilitator note: *This is a good place to establish the posture of the whole study: We are not entering this book to master God. We are allowing our vision of God to be enlarged.*

The God we learned to imagine

Read aloud: “Most of us were taught to believe in God long before we were taught to imagine God.”

Ask:

- What is the difference between believing in God and imagining God?
- What kind of God did you picture during your early years of faith?
- Was God primarily loving, watchful, demanding, close, distant, delighted, disappointed, or difficult to picture?
- Did you imagine God as Father, Son, and Spirit, or primarily as one undefined divine Person?
- How did that image affect prayer, obedience, or your sense of worth?

Facilitator note: *Participants may share painful or complicated experiences. Do not rush to correct their image of God. The first task is to help them notice it.*

A helpful response may be: “That image makes sense in light of what you experienced.” The goal is awareness, not immediate resolution.

Exploring the biblical pattern

Read the selected passages slowly.

Ask:

- What do you notice about the way Father, Son, and Spirit relate?
- What is shared among them?
- Where do you see distinction?
- Where do you see unity?
- What words suggest movement, relationship, indwelling, or communion?
- Where are human beings invited into this shared life?

After reading John 17, ask:

What does it mean that Jesus grounds the unity of believers in the unity he shares with the Father?

Possible summary: The unity Jesus describes is not mere agreement or organizational sameness. It flows from participation in divine love.

The Trinity in the Gospel of John

The facilitator might summarize the chapter's movement:

- The Father is revealed in the Son.
- The Son shares the life of the Father.
- The Spirit makes that shared life present within believers.
- Believers are drawn into communion, mission, love, and glory.

Then ask:

- Which of these movements feels most familiar?
- Which feels newest or most difficult to grasp?
- What changes when Jesus is understood not merely as a messenger from God, but as sharing the life of God?
- What changes when the Spirit is understood not merely as help from God, but as God present within us?

Describing mystery

Read: "My intention here is not to linger on the scaffolding, but to step inside the living space it supports."

Ask:

- What is the value of theological scaffolding?

- What would it mean to step inside the living space?
- Why do we sometimes prefer explanation to mystery?
- Can mystery deepen faith rather than weaken it?

Facilitator note: *The group does not need to solve the philosophical questions surrounding the Trinity. A useful distinction is: Mystery does not mean that nothing can be known. It means that what can be known is greater than what can be fully explained.*

Exploring the analogies

Invite participants to look at the analogy table.

Ask:

- Which analogy has helped you most?
- Which analogy has troubled or confused you?
- What does each analogy reveal?
- What does each fail to capture?
- Why might imagination be necessary when speaking about God?
- Why must every analogy eventually break down?

Facilitator caution

Do not let this become a contest to identify the “correct” analogy. The chapter explicitly acknowledges that none is complete. A helpful reminder: Analogies are windows, not definitions.

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should select only those most appropriate for the group.

Understanding

- Why does the doctrine of the Trinity matter for spiritual formation?
- What is the difference between saying “God loves” and saying relational love belongs to God’s eternal life?
- What do the passages from John reveal about the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit?
- Why is mystery appropriate when speaking about God?
- How can theological language help without containing God?

Personal reflection

- What picture of God have you carried most of your life?
- Has that picture made relationship with God feel restful, heavy, joyful, anxious, or distant?

- Which Person of the Trinity has felt most familiar?
- Which has seemed least present?
- What part of your image of God may need to be enlarged?

Formation

- How might prayer change if God is understood as communion rather than solitary authority?
- How might your sense of identity change if you are invited into God's shared life?
- How might a relational understanding of God affect the way you relate to others?
- What would it mean this week to approach God with imagination as well as belief?

Spiritual practice

Invite participants to sit quietly with open hands.

The facilitator may say:

We are not trying to explain God. We are making ourselves available to the God who has already drawn near.

Pray slowly:

Father, reveal your love.

Jesus, show us the face of God.

Holy Spirit, make the shared life of God present within us.

Enlarge what has become small in our understanding.

Draw us from distance into communion.

Allow a minute of silence.

Participants may share one word or image that came to mind, but no one should be required to speak.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share (for further reflection throughout the week)

Notice: What image of God have you carried?

Receive: God is not solitary or distant. Father, Son, and Spirit live in eternal communion and draw us near.

Practice: Spend several minutes each day noticing the presence of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Share: Approach one relationship this week as an opportunity to reflect divine love, mutuality, and presence.

Closing question: What became larger in your understanding of God today?

Closing prayer: A brief prayer may be used:

Triune God, enlarge our vision of you.

Teach us to receive mystery with humility and love.

Help us see you not as distant, but as the living communion into which we are welcomed.

Amen.

Session Two: Participating in the Shared Life

Session purpose: This session moves from describing the Trinity to receiving and participating in the life of Father, Son, and Spirit. Through the chapter's images of hooks, coffee, cups, movement, and drinking, participants explore what it means for formation, community, and daily life to arise from participation in God.

Central truth: The shared life of God is not merely something we observe or believe. It is a life we are invited to receive, embody, and share.

Key movement: This session moves from: *observation to participation*

The group is invited to consider the difference between knowing about the Trinity and living within the love of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read from “Hooked on the Trinity” through the end of the chapter.
- Reflect on which image—hooks, coffee, cup, dance, or drinking—communicates participation most clearly.
- Be prepared to keep the playful analogies connected to the serious theological claim beneath them.
- Avoid spending too much time on the technical names of historic heresies unless the group has particular interest.
- Prepare to lead the group into a brief practice of receiving rather than only discussing.

Suggested Scriptures

- John 14:18–23
- John 17:20–26
- 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12–13
- Ephesians 3:14–19
- Philippians 2:5–11

A shorter session might use John 17 and Ephesians 3.

Suggested session flow:

- Reconnection and review — 10 minutes
- Hooks and relational reality — 15 minutes
- Coffee, community, and participation — 25 minutes
- Formation and personal reflection — 20 minutes
- Prayer of openness — 10 minutes

Reconnecting with Session One

Ask:

- What stayed with you from the first session?
- Did you notice Father, Son, or Spirit differently during the week?
- Did anything begin to shift in your image of God?
- What questions or resistance arose?

Facilitators note

Do not feel pressure to answer every question. Some questions are signs that participants are engaging honestly with mystery.

Hooked on the Trinity

Read aloud: “We are ‘hooked’ because we were made by a God who is eternally connected.”

Ask:

- What do you think the image of “hooks” communicates?
- Where do you notice interconnection in creation?
- Where do you notice the human longing to belong?
- What does it mean to say reality itself may be relational?
- How does this challenge an individualistic understanding of faith?
- What happens spiritually when people believe they are meant to live independently?

The facilitator may summarize: If relationality belongs to God's being, then connection is not an optional addition to spiritual life. It belongs to what it means to bear God's image.

The Trinity as the ultimate hook

Read: "Relationality is not just something God does. It is who God is."

Ask:

- What is the difference between God choosing to relate and relationship belonging to God's very life?
- How might this affect the way we understand love?
- How might it affect leadership, authority, unity, and belonging?
- What would it mean for a church to reflect the relational life of God?

This discussion begins preparing the group for the later chapters on unity and community.

Coffee theology

Invite participants to respond to the coffee analogy.

Ask:

- What does the analogy help you see about distinction and unity?
- What does "fully coffee" help communicate?
- What does the analogy fail to communicate?
- Why is it important that Father, Son, and Spirit are not ranked as greater and lesser?
- What assumptions about hierarchy might be challenged by divine equality and mutuality?

Optional theological clarification

The chapter names several common distortions:

- **Modalism:** one Person appearing in three forms
- **Arianism:** the Son as less than fully divine
- **Tritheism:** three separate gods
- **Subordinationism:** Son and Spirit eternally ranked beneath the Father

The facilitator need not lead a detailed theological lesson. A simple summary is sufficient:

Christian faith holds together real distinction, full divinity, and indivisible unity.

The cup as community

Read: “Christian community does not create God’s shared life; it is where we learn to savor it together.”

Ask:

- Why is the cup important to the analogy?
- What might the cup represent?
- How does community help us receive what is already true of God?
- What happens when Christian formation becomes entirely private?
- How can different communities be like different cups while still sharing the same divine life?
- What makes a community a vessel of participation rather than simply a gathering of individuals?

Facilitator note: *This is a good opportunity to connect theology to the group itself.*

Ask: *What kind of shared space do we hope to become during this study?*

Participants may name qualities such as honesty, listening, safety, curiosity, humility, mutuality, and prayerfulness.

Kenosis and self-giving love

Read Philippians 2:5–11.

Ask:

- What does Jesus’ self-emptying reveal about divine love?
- Why does self-giving not make the Son less divine?
- What is the difference between self-emptying love and imposed inferiority?
- How might participation in Christ form us toward humility without erasing our dignity?
- Where are you being invited to release privilege, control, or self-protection for the sake of love?

A useful clarification: *Kenosis* is not becoming less human, less valuable, or less visible. It is the freedom to give oneself in love without losing one’s God-given identity.

The perichoresis swirl

Read: “The dance is already happening, but drinking is how my soul joins the rhythm.”

Ask:

- What is the difference between standing beside the cup and drinking?

- What might it mean to participate in God's life?
- How is participation different from religious performance?
- How might prayer, Scripture, worship, community, and service become ways of receiving rather than earning?
- Can you think of a time when you knew a great deal about God but still felt spiritually thirsty?
- What helps you move from observation to participation?

Formation is sipping the shared life

Read these lines one at a time:

- "We don't just believe in the Trinity, we drink it."
- "You can sit beside the cup and still be thirsty."
- "Some sniff, some sip, some gulp, but grace fills them all."

Ask:

- Which statement speaks most directly to you?
- What might "sipping" look like in ordinary life?
- Are you more likely to analyze, hesitate, receive slowly, or plunge in?
- Where might God be inviting you to receive grace rather than manage your spiritual life?
- What would it mean to trust that the Trinity holds you rather than imagining that you must hold everything together?

Why understanding matters

The chapter names several ways our image of God shapes us:

- how we understand love,
- how we experience judgment,
- how we respond to guilt and shame,
- how we think about unity,
- how we relate to authority,
- how we understand sin,
- how we see ourselves.

Invite participants to choose one.

Ask:

- Which area of your life has been most shaped by your image of God?
- Have you tended to see yourself as "never enough" or as deeply beloved?

- How might a fuller vision of God reshape that area?
- What inherited assumption may need to be reconsidered?

Core discussion questions *You may want to let persons in the group choose to answer the one that is most meaningful to them. Perhaps print them out or make the questions available online during the session so they can remember the questions.*

Understanding

- What does the language of participation add to belief in the Trinity?
- How does the image of “hooks” connect divine life with human belonging?
- What does *perichoresis* help us imagine?
- Why is community essential to participation?
- What does Christ’s self-emptying reveal about divine love?

Personal reflection

- Where do you feel most connected—to God, to others, to creation, or to yourself?
- Where do you feel disconnected?
- Are you more comfortable studying God or receiving from God?
- What keeps you sitting beside the cup rather than drinking?
- What part of God’s shared life are you longing to experience more deeply?

Formation

- How might participation replace performance in your spiritual life?
- What would it mean to receive belovedness rather than earn approval?
- How might your relationships change if you viewed them as places to reflect divine communion?
- What practice could help you “sip” the shared life of God this week?
- How might this group become a community that receives and shares God’s life together?

Spiritual practice

Receiving the shared life

Invite participants to sit quietly, perhaps holding a cup or resting open hands in their laps.

The facilitator may say:

The life of Father, Son, and Spirit does not begin when we notice it. The dance is already happening. We are simply becoming available to receive.

Pause between each line:

- *Father, I receive your welcome.*
- *Jesus, I receive the life you share with the Father.*
- *Holy Spirit, I receive your indwelling presence.*
- *Where I have lived from distance, draw me near.*
- *Where I have performed for love, teach me to receive.*
- *Where I have tried to hold everything together, remind me that I am held.*

Allow a time of silence.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where have you been observing God rather than participating in God's life?

Receive

You are not standing outside divine communion. You are being drawn into the love of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Practice

Choose one daily act—prayer, walking, drinking coffee, reading Scripture, or sitting in silence—as a reminder to receive God's presence.

Share

Offer one act of relational presence this week: listen without fixing, welcome without evaluating, or serve without seeking control.

Closing question

What would it mean for you personally to “drink” the shared life of God?

Closing prayer

Use the chapter's **Prayer of Openness**:

Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit,

Open the eyes of my heart to see you as you are, not as I have imagined you.

Where my vision of you has been small or incomplete, please enlarge it.

Where I have learned to relate to you from a distance, draw me into your shared life.

Teach me to receive what you have always been offering:

*love, presence, and communion.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes for both sessions:

- ✓ **Keep the goal relational:** The group is not trying to pass a theology examination.
😊 The aim is to enlarge participants' vision of God and invite them into deeper communion.
- ✓ **Do not rush mystery:** Some participants may want precise explanations. Others may feel overwhelmed. Remind the group that mystery is not failure.
- ✓ **Avoid correcting every imperfect phrase:** People may use language that is theologically imprecise as they begin thinking aloud. Unless something harmful is being asserted, allow the conversation to develop before offering clarification.
- ✓ **Honor different spiritual histories:** Some participants may have experienced the Trinity as rich and life-giving. Others may barely have encountered it. Some may have been wounded by distorted images of God. Make room for all three experiences.
- ✓ **Choose rather than cover:** The facilitator should select the questions most appropriate for the group. The purpose is not to finish the guide. It is to help the group encounter its central invitation.
- ✓ **Keep returning to the central movement:** We are moving from a distant or solitary image of God toward the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit—and from observing that life toward participating in it.

Chapter 2: The Missing Verse in Our Hymnal: Recovering the Trinity (Two sessions)

Session Three: Peeling Back What Shaped Us

The goal is not to examine every historical detail or settle every theological question. Participants have the chapter for fuller explanation. The group gathering should help them

notice how inherited theology formed them, encounter Christ as the Living Word, and begin practicing prayer as participation in the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Session purpose

This session helps participants recognize how songs, sermons, traditions, interpretive methods, and spiritual practices formed their image of God before they consciously examined it. It invites them to distinguish between Scripture and the Living Word to whom Scripture bears witness and to encounter the gaze of Christ as healing rather than condemning.

Central truth

Examining inherited theology is not abandoning faith; it is allowing God to uncover what may have obscured the relational life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Key movement

This session moves from: *unexamined inheritance* to *honest awareness* and renewed encounter

Participants are invited to ask not only, “What was I taught?” but also, “What kind of person did that teaching form me to become?”

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read from the beginning of Chapter 2 through “Relational Hunger Arises.”
- Reflect on one inherited understanding of God that was sincere but incomplete.
- Prepare to speak respectfully about the Restoration Movement and other traditions.
- Remember that participants may experience grief, defensiveness, relief, or confusion as familiar assumptions are reconsidered.
- Choose a few central passages rather than attempting every historical and biblical point.
- Avoid framing the session as traditional people versus enlightened people. The chapter repeatedly acknowledges sincere motives alongside unintended consequences.

Suggested stopping point: **Session One** may cover the beginning of the chapter through “Relational Hunger Arises.” **Session Two** would begin with “Experiencing the Trinity Through Prayer.”

Suggested Scriptures

- John 1:1–5, 14, 18
- John 5:37–40
- Hebrews 1:1–3
- Hebrews 4:9–16

- Matthew 11:28–30

A shorter session could focus on John 1, John 5, and Hebrews 4.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and reconnection — 10 minutes
- Inherited images and the onion metaphor — 15 minutes
- The Living Word — 25 minutes
- Hebrews 4 and the gaze of Christ — 20 minutes
- Personal reflection and prayer — 10 minutes

Opening reflection

Begin with the story of the missing verse from “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

Ask:

- What struck you about the changed hymn lyric?
- Have you ever discovered that something absent from your tradition was central elsewhere in the Christian world?
- What did your church tradition emphasize strongly?
- What received little attention?
- How might what was omitted have formed us as powerfully as what was taught?

***Facilitator note:** The opening story is not merely about hymn wording. It introduces the chapter’s larger question: What happens when the Trinity is affirmed in theory but omitted from the imagination and practice of faith?*

Peeling the onion

Read aloud: “Peeling is not destruction; it is preparation.”

Ask: (remember, choose 2 or 3, or let the group answer the one most meaningful to them)

- What does the onion metaphor help us understand about spiritual formation?
- Why can examining inherited beliefs feel threatening or painful?
- What is the difference between deconstructing faith and allowing faith to deepen?
- Have you ever experienced grief when a familiar understanding began to change?
- What might God uncover beneath layers of fear, control, or certainty?

Facilitator note: *Some participants may fear that asking questions is a sign of unfaithfulness. A helpful reassurance is:*

The goal is not to discard everything inherited, but to discern what reveals God more fully and what may have obscured God's life.

How our traditions form us

The chapter describes a tradition shaped by sincere commitments to biblical purity, unity, simplicity, and restoration, while also naming unintended consequences.

Ask: (choose 2 or 3)

- Which motives behind the Restoration Movement do you appreciate?
- How might a desire for certainty make mystery difficult to receive?
- How might rejection of creeds protect Scripture in one sense but isolate us from the wider church in another?
- What is the difference between affirming the Trinity and being formed by the Trinity?
- How can a tradition become “word heavy but presence light”?

Invite participants to consider the listed consequences of a thin Trinity:

- the Father as distant evaluator,
- the individual overshadowing community,
- hierarchy treated as natural or biblical,
- the Son mainly as sacrifice or example,
- the Spirit reduced to conscience or biblical interpretation,
- formation becoming performance.

Ask:

Which of these feels most familiar, and what effect did it have?

The “trinity” of God, Bible, and discipleship

The chapter describes a functional substitute in which:

- God becomes primarily authority,
- the Bible becomes the accessible divine voice,
- discipleship becomes the means of transformation.

Ask:

- Why might this framework feel safe and dependable?
- What might be lost when the Bible functionally replaces the Spirit?
- What happens when discipleship relies more on effort than empowerment?
- How can Scripture become a means of encounter rather than a tool of control?
- Where have you experienced Bible study as nourishment? Where has it felt like evaluation?

***Facilitator clarification:** The chapter does not diminish Scripture. It asks Scripture to serve its fullest purpose: bearing witness to God and bringing us into relationship with Christ.*

Recovering the Living Word

Read John 1:1–5 and 14.

Ask:

- What does John mean by “the Word”?
- What do we learn from the statement that the Word became flesh?
- How is a person different from a principle, system, or collection of information?
- What changes when Jesus is understood as the personal self-revelation of God?
- How can Scripture lead us to Christ without being confused with Christ?

A helpful summary:

Scripture is the inspired witness that brings us to the Living Word. The written word serves encounter with the One who became flesh.

Searching Scripture and missing the Person

Read John 5:37–40.

Ask: (choose 2 or 3)

- What were Jesus’ hearers doing correctly?
- What were they still missing?
- Why does diligent Bible study not automatically produce spiritual life?
- How might the desire to be right keep us from coming to Christ?
- Have you ever used Scripture to gain certainty while avoiding vulnerability before God?
- What does it mean to “come to me to have life”?

Facilitator note: *This passage may unsettle participants who equate biblical knowledge with maturity. Hold the tension gently: Scripture knowledge is a gift. Jesus warns us only that the gift must lead us to him.*

Hebrews 4: Christ as mirror and mercy

Read Hebrews 4:9–16 as one continuous passage.

Ask:

- What themes surround the words “living and active”?
- How do rest, exposure, compassion, mercy, and grace belong together?
- How have you heard Hebrews 4:12 used in the past?
- What changes when the One who exposes us is also the compassionate High Priest?
- Do you usually imagine God’s gaze as scrutiny or sanctuary?
- What might it mean that Christ is both “the mirror and the mercy”?

Allow some silence after the final question.

Facilitator clarification:

The chapter offers a Christ-centered reading of the passage. It does not require the group to deny every reference to God’s spoken word or Scripture. Its central insight is that verses 12–16 culminate in personal encounter with the One before whom we are known and welcomed.

Formation by presence

Read aloud:

- “If the Word is a Person, spiritual formation is relational, not informational.”
- “We are formed by presence rather than precision.”
- “We are shaped by proximity, not performance.”

Ask: (choose 2 or 3 or let participants choose which one they want to answer)

- Which statement most speaks to your experience?
- Where might precision still serve love and formation?
- When does precision become a substitute for trust?
- What spiritual practice has sometimes felt like a checklist?
- How might that practice become a place of encounter again?
- What would change if you trusted the gaze that meets you?

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should select the questions most appropriate for the group.

Understanding

- How can sincere theology have unintended formational consequences?
- Why did some traditions hesitate to use creeds or post-biblical theological language?
- What distinction does the chapter make between Scripture and the Living Word?
- How does John 5 challenge a purely informational approach to faith?
- How does the context of Hebrews 4 reshape the meaning of exposure?

Personal reflection: (pick 2 or 3)

- What version of God did you absorb before you chose it?
- Was God imagined more as evaluator or participant?
- Did your tradition make room for mystery?
- How has fear of being wrong affected your spiritual life?
- Does being fully seen by Christ feel threatening, comforting, or both?

Formation

- What inherited layer may God be gently inviting you to examine?
- Where might information need to become encounter?
- What practice could move from performance toward presence?
- How might trust in Christ's compassionate gaze change confession or prayer?
- What would it mean for Scripture to nourish rather than merely correct?

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

What inherited image of God still shapes your response to prayer, Scripture, or failure?

Receive

Christ sees you fully and welcomes you to the throne of grace.

Practice

Read Hebrews 4:9–16 slowly during the week, noticing the movement from rest to exposure to compassion and mercy.

Share

Listen to someone's spiritual experience without immediately correcting, evaluating, or fixing it.

Closing question

What layer may God be gently peeling back in you?

Closing prayer

Living Word, lead us beyond information into encounter.

Where our faith has been narrowed by fear or performance, enlarge it.

Teach us to trust the gaze that knows us completely and meets us with mercy.

Amen.

Session Four: Recovering Trinitarian Prayer

Session purpose

This session helps participants notice how prayer habits reveal their lived theology and invites them to experience prayer as participation in the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit. It explores what it means to pray to the Father, with and through the Son, and in the Spirit—not as a formula, but as relational awareness.

Central truth

Prayer is not a technique for reaching a distant God; it is participation in the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit already opened to us.

Key movement: This session moves from: *formula and spiritual effort to relationship and participation*

Participants are invited to ask not only, “How should I pray?” but also, “What story about God is my prayer life telling?”

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read from “Experiencing the Trinity Through Prayer” through the end of Chapter 2.
- Reflect on personal prayer language and the image of God it communicates.
- Avoid making participants self-conscious about ending prayers with “in Jesus’ name.”
- Emphasize invitation rather than correction.
- Prepare to lead an extended Trinitarian prayer practice.
- Be ready to reassure the group that prayer may be addressed to Father, Son, or Spirit without rigid policing of language.

Suggested Scriptures

- Matthew 6:9–13
- John 14:12–17
- John 15:26
- John 16:13–15
- Romans 8:14–17, 26–27
- Ephesians 2:18
- Galatians 4:4–7

A shorter session could use Matthew 6, John 14, and Romans 8.

Suggested session flow:

- Reconnection and review — 10 minutes
- Prayer as lived theology — 15 minutes
- “In Jesus’ name” and participation — 20 minutes
- The Spirit’s presence in prayer — 15 minutes
- Trinitarian prayer practice — 20 minutes
- Closing reflection — 10 minutes

Reconnecting with Session Three

Ask:

- What stayed with you from the last session?
- Did you notice the way you approached Scripture during the week?
- Did Hebrews 4 feel different when read as a whole?
- Did anything change in the way you imagined Christ’s gaze?
- What questions or resistance remained?

Prayer reveals theology

Read aloud: “Prayer is one of the primary places where our lived theology shows.”

Ask:

- When you pray, whom do you picture yourself addressing?
- Is the image clear, vague, relational, distant, or undefined?
- Which Person of the Trinity appears most often in your prayer?

- Which is least present?
- Does prayer feel more like conversation, request, duty, surrender, or participation?
- What story do your habitual prayers tell about God?

Facilitator note: *There are no embarrassing answers. Many participants will realize they pray to an undefined “God.” The goal is awareness, not theological grading.*

To the Father

Read Matthew 6:9 and Galatians 4:4–7.

Ask:

- What does Jesus’ invitation to pray “Our Father” reveal?
- What is the difference between approaching God as children and negotiating as servants?
- Does the word *Father* feel welcoming, complicated, or both?
- How does Jesus reveal the Father’s heart?
- What might need healing for prayer to the Father to become trusting rather than fearful?

Facilitator sensitivity

For some, the language of Father may be difficult because of family experience. Do not dismiss this. Emphasize that Jesus reveals the Father rather than earthly fathers defining God.

With and through the Son

Read John 14:12–14.

Ask:

- What have you understood “in Jesus’ name” to mean?
- Has the phrase felt relational, respectful, required, or almost like a spiritual guarantee?
- What is the difference between using Jesus’ name and praying within Jesus’ character?
- How might praying in Jesus’ name align us with his love, mission, and purposes?
- What does it mean to share in Jesus’ relationship with the Father?

A helpful summary:

“In Jesus’ name” is not a password added to prayer. It means praying from within the life, character, authority, and mission of Jesus.

Formula and control

The chapter suggests that repeated language can gradually become unquestioned technique.

Ask:

- Why are spiritual formulas appealing?
- How can formulas create a sense of control?
- When does a helpful prayer pattern become mechanical?
- Have you ever worried that a prayer was invalid because it omitted the expected wording?
- What is the difference between faithful practice and incantation?
- How can familiar words become meaningful again?

Facilitator clarification: *The goal is not to stop saying “in Jesus’ name.” It is to recover its depth. A familiar phrase may remain beautiful when it expresses genuine participation rather than functioning as a required closing signal.*

In and through the Spirit

Read Romans 8:14–17 and 26–27.

Ask:

- What does the Spirit do in these verses?
- What changes when prayer begins not with our effort but with the Spirit already at work within us?
- How does the Spirit help when words fail?
- What is the difference between God being “over us” and God being present within us?
- Why might some traditions feel hesitant to address or attend to the Spirit?
- How might greater awareness of the Spirit affect silence, discernment, or intercession?

Read aloud: “Prayer is never something we initiate on our own. It is participation in the Spirit’s movement.”

Invite the group to sit with that thought.

Prayer as shared life

The chapter offers this Trinitarian pattern:

To the Father: I come to you in trust and belovedness.

With the Son: You are the face of God turned toward me.

Through the Spirit: You pray in me, guide me, and form my heart.

Ask:

- Which line feels most natural to you?
- Which feels newest?
- How does this pattern differ from a linear transaction?
- What would it mean to pray *with* God rather than merely *to* God?
- How does prayer become a place of formation?
- How might this understanding reduce anxiety or performance?

A note about hierarchy

The chapter raises the concern that prayer habits can unintentionally form a hierarchy in the imagination.

Ask:

- Have you pictured the Father as the one in charge, Jesus as the one who makes access possible, and the Spirit as an assistant?
- How might that image differ from the mutual indwelling and shared life of the Trinity?
- How can we honor the distinct work of Father, Son, and Spirit without ranking them?
- How might a non-hierarchical vision of God reshape human relationships and leadership?

The facilitator need not resolve every theological question here. The aim is to help participants notice the image their practices may be reinforcing.

Invite participants to review the early prayers and the Nicene Creed included in the chapter.

Ask:

- ❖ What, if anything, did you notice or learn from reading these early Trinitarian prayers and creeds?

Core discussion questions

Understanding

- Why does prayer reveal our lived theology?
- What does “in Jesus’ name” mean beyond the closing words of a prayer?
- What role does the Spirit play in prayer?
- How is prayer participation rather than transaction?
- How can naming Father, Son, and Spirit deepen awareness without becoming another formula?

Personal reflection

- Whom do you instinctively picture when you pray?
- Does prayer feel like welcome or negotiation?
- What prayer habit have you never examined?
- When have you experienced the Spirit praying beyond your words?
- Where does your prayer life feel relational, and where does it feel mechanical?

Formation

- How might prayer form you as a beloved child?
- What would it mean to pray in the character of Jesus?
- How might you become more attentive to the Spirit's presence?
- What phrase or habit could be reclaimed with deeper meaning?
- How could prayer become a place of surrender rather than control?

Spiritual practice

Prayer within the shared life of God

Invite participants to sit quietly, perhaps with open hands.

Explain: This is not a formula that must be repeated correctly. It is a way of becoming attentive to the God who is already present.

To the Father: Father, I come not as a servant bargaining for acceptance, but as your beloved child.

Pause.

Let me rest in the love from which I came and toward which you draw me.

Pause.

With the Son: Jesus, you are the face of God turned toward me.

Pause.

Draw me into your trust, your compassion, and your communion with the Father.

Pause.

Let my desires become aligned with your life and mission.

Pause.

Through the Spirit: Holy Spirit, breathe within me.

Pause.

Pray where I have no words.

Reveal what is true.

Guide what is unfinished.

Form the life of Christ in me.

Allow at least a minute of silence.

Close with: *Father, Son, and Spirit, teach us to live and pray inside your shared life. Amen.*

Participants may share one word, image, resistance, or invitation they noticed.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

What story about God is your prayer life telling?

Receive

Prayer begins within the love of the Father, the communion of the Son, and the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

Practice

During one prayer each day, pause to become aware of Father, Son, and Spirit without feeling the need to use particular wording.

Share

Pray with someone in a way that communicates welcome, companionship, and trust rather than urgency or pressure.

Closing question

What might change if prayer became something you do with God rather than something you perform for God?

Closing prayer

Triune God, recover in us what has become thin or forgotten.

Teach us to come to the Father in trust,

to pray with the Son in love and alignment,

and to rest in the Spirit who prays within us.

Let prayer become participation in your shared life.

Amen.

Facilitator notes for both sessions:

- ✓ Speak respectfully about inherited traditions
- ✓ The chapter critiques genuine weaknesses, but it also recognizes sincere devotion, commitment to Scripture, and the desire for unity. Avoid contempt or superiority.
- ✓ Expect grief as well as relief
- ✓ Some participants may grieve lost years, fearful teaching, or a distant image of God. Do not rush them toward a positive conclusion.
- ✓ Do not create a new formula
- ✓ Trinitarian prayer is an invitation to awareness, not a new set of mandatory words.
- ✓ Keep Scripture and encounter together
- ✓ Avoid framing the discussion as Bible versus relationship. The chapter seeks a way of reading Scripture that leads into encounter with Christ.
- ✓ Make room for different prayer habits
- ✓ Participants may naturally address the Father, Jesus, the Spirit, or simply “God.” The aim is not to police language but to enlarge awareness of the full life of God.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement

Recovery begins with awareness, moves toward healing, and culminates in participation—learning to live, pray, and love inside the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Chapter 3: When Theology Misshapes the Soul

Session Five

An optional two-session approach for groups that need more space: Session One: How theology misshapes the soul and Session Two: The ache as invitation and healing. I have presented this as one session

Session purpose

This session helps participants recognize that theology is never merely intellectual. The way we imagine God shapes our instincts, emotions, obedience, relationships, and capacity to receive love. Participants are invited to notice where a distant, divided, or monitoring image of God may have produced fear, performance, shame, or exhaustion, and to receive the ache for something more as an invitation into the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Central truth

A distorted image of God can misshape the soul, but the ache it creates may become the Spirit’s invitation into healing, belovedness, and participation.

Key movement

This session moves from: *surveillance, performance, and distance* to *indwelling, belonging, and shared life*

The aim is not to assign blame for the past, but to notice what formed us and allow a fuller vision of God to begin re-forming us.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the chapter slowly and notice where it touches personal experience.
- Be prepared for participants to share grief, anxiety, exhaustion, or painful church experiences.
- Avoid turning the discussion into criticism of particular people or traditions.
- Remember that the chapter names sincere intentions alongside unintended consequences.
- Decide whether to use the rewritten children's song aloud.
- Allow the reflective exercise at the end to carry much of the session's personal application.
- Be prepared to protect silence. This chapter should not feel rushed.

Suggested Scriptures

- John 14:16–23
- John 17:20–23
- 2 Peter 1:3–4
- 1 Corinthians 2:12–16
- Matthew 11:28–30
- Ephesians 3:14–19

A shorter session could focus on John 14, Matthew 11, and Ephesians 3.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and reconnection — 10 minutes
- Theology and the image of God — 20 minutes
- Participation versus observation — 15 minutes
- The soul-level cost and the ache within — 20 minutes
- Belovedness, healing, and reflective exercise — 20 minutes
- Closing prayer — 5 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask:

What sentence or section in the chapter stayed with you most strongly?

Then:

Did anything in the chapter give language to an experience you have had?

Did anything feel relieving, uncomfortable, or difficult to accept?

What did you notice about the connection between theology and spiritual formation?

The facilitator might summarize: The chapter is not only asking whether our theology is technically correct. It is asking what kind of soul that theology forms.

Theology is never neutral

Read aloud: “What we believe about God always forms us, for better or worse.”

Ask:

- What does this statement mean to you?
- How can a belief be doctrinally sincere yet form people in unhealthy ways?
- What is the difference between theology on paper and lived theology?
- What do our habits, fears, and instincts reveal about the God we actually imagine?
- Have you ever discovered that your emotional image of God differed from what you said you believed?

A helpful follow-up: When life becomes difficult, which image of God tends to surface first?

The God who watches from above

Invite participants to reflect on the children’s song about the Father “looking down.”

Ask:

- What picture of God does that language create?
- What may have been good in its intention?
- What unintended effect might it have had?
- Did you grow up with an image of God as observer, inspector, evaluator, or monitor?
- How might that image affect confession, prayer, obedience, or failure?
- What is the difference between being watched and being indwelt?

Read aloud: “We are not formed by fear of being seen, but by love that lives within.”

Allow a brief silence.

Then ask: What changes in you when God’s presence is imagined as indwelling love rather than surveillance?

Participation rather than observation

Read one or more of the suggested Scriptures.

Ask:

- What do these passages suggest about God's nearness?
- What does participation add to our understanding of discipleship?
- How is new birth more than moral improvement?
- What might it mean to have the mind of Christ?
- How does sharing in divine life differ from merely imitating Jesus from a distance?
- What happens to obedience when it flows from belonging?

A useful summary: Participation does not weaken holiness or obedience. It changes their source—from fear and self-management to shared life and responsive love.

Faith shaped by distance

The chapter names several possible results of a distant God-image:

- faith becomes believing the right things,
- discipleship becomes trying harder,
- holiness becomes sin management,
- community becomes alignment,
- salvation becomes transaction,
- love becomes obligation.

Ask: (Let group respond to question most meaningful to them)

- Which of these descriptions feels most familiar?
- Which one has had the greatest effect on you?
- What is the difference between alignment and communion?
- What happens when love is experienced primarily as duty?
- Where have you felt pressure to manage your spiritual life rather than receive life from God?

The facilitator should not force personal disclosure. Participants may speak generally if that feels safer.

The rewritten song

Read or sing the revised lyrics, depending on the comfort of the group.

Then ask:

- What changes in the emotional tone of the song?
- Which line speaks most deeply to you?
- What picture of Father, Son, and Spirit emerges?

- How might repeated songs and prayers re-form our instincts over time?
- Are there other familiar phrases from your early faith that might benefit from being gently reimagined?

A simple observation from the facilitator may be enough: The aim is not to mock what formed us, but to receive what was good and allow what was incomplete to be enlarged.

Mystery and obedience

Read aloud: “Mystery and obedience are not opposites.”

Ask:

- Why might certainty feel safer than mystery?
- How can certainty become control or boundary keeping?
- How can mystery cultivate humility?
- What remains clear even when much about God remains mysterious?
- How does trust differ from having every question resolved?
- Have you ever confused conviction with certainty?

A helpful clarification:

Mystery does not mean that nothing can be known. It means God is always greater than what we can contain.

Communion and hierarchy

The chapter connects a hierarchical image of God with hierarchical instincts in human relationships.

Ask:

- How might a God imagined primarily through rank and authority shape church culture?
- What happens when equality is affirmed verbally but hierarchy remains instinctive?
- How does mutual self-giving differ from domination or imposed submission?
- What might a community shaped by communion look like?
- How might the Trinity re-form the ways we understand authority, difference, and belonging?

This question may prepare the group for later chapters without attempting to resolve every implication now.

The soul-level cost

Invite participants to consider the chapter's descriptions of anxiety, exhaustion, shame, self-reliance, and spiritual disconnection.

Ask: (choose 2 or 3, or let people answer their choice of questions)

- Which of these consequences have you seen in Christian life?
- Why might performance-centered faith become exhausting?
- What question often lies beneath spiritual exhaustion?
- Have you ever wondered, "What am I doing wrong?" when what you needed was a larger image of God?
- What is the difference between effort that flows from love and effort driven by fear?

A facilitator might say: The chapter does not deny the cost of discipleship. It asks whether the energy of discipleship comes from fear of disappointing God or participation in God's life.

Grief and the need for more

The personal section about loss and caregiving is important, but the facilitator need not ask participants to match that level of disclosure.

Consider asking 2 of these questions:

- Why does suffering expose the limits of a purely informational faith?
- What do people need from God in seasons when explanations are insufficient?
- Have you experienced a time when doctrine was true but did not feel sufficient by itself?
- What is the difference between knowing about God's comfort and experiencing God as comforter?
- Why can receiving from God feel difficult for people formed primarily to serve and perform?

The quotation from Daniel Wallace could be mentioned, followed by: What do you think he means when he says Scripture was authoritatively helpful, but he also needed God personally?

The facilitator should keep this from becoming a false choice between Scripture and presence. The deeper point is that Scripture is meant to bring us into relationship with the living God.

Belovedness

Read Ephesians 3:14–19.

Then ask:

- What does it mean to know a love that surpasses knowledge?
- How can we believe we are beloved in theory without receiving it inwardly?

- Which identity has been most powerful in your life: what you do, what you have, what others think, or being God's beloved?
- Why can receiving belovedness feel harder than working for approval?
- What might change if belovedness became the starting point of obedience?

Read aloud: "We are not what we do, what we have, or what others think of us."

Allow participants to sit silently with that sentence.

The ache as invitation

Read: "The ache is the gap between the God we know exists and the God we have been taught to imagine."

Ask:

- Does that description name anything in your own experience?
- How might dissatisfaction or spiritual hunger become a gift?
- What if the ache is not evidence of failure but evidence that the Spirit is drawing us?
- What image of God no longer feels large enough?
- What fuller vision of God are you beginning to receive?

Then read: "The ache is a holy hunger from the Spirit."

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose only those most suited to the group.

Understanding

- How does theology shape spirituality?
- What is the difference between observation and participation?
- How can an image of God as distant evaluator affect formation?
- Why do mystery and obedience belong together?
- What does the Trinity reveal about communion, equality, and self-giving love?
- Why is belovedness central to transformation?

Personal reflection

- What early image or phrase most shaped your view of God?
- Did you experience God as near or distant, indwelling or watchful?
- Where has faith felt like performance?
- What part of your spiritual life has become exhausting?
- Is it easier for you to give to God or receive from God?

- What ache or hunger may be pointing toward a larger vision of God?

Formation

- How might prayer become conversational presence?
- What would obedience from belonging look like?
- What spiritual practice needs to move from monitoring to communion?
- How might belovedness reshape the way you respond to failure?
- What old image of God may need to be gently reinterpreted?
- How can this group become a place where people experience shared life rather than evaluation?

Reflective practice

Use the exercise in the chapter.

Invite participants to consider:

- What is one of your earliest images or phrases about God?
- What emotion accompanies it?
- Did it suggest that God was near or far?
- What might Father, Son, and Spirit be inviting you to revisit or enlarge?
- What can be received with gratitude?
- What may need healing or reinterpretation?

Remind the group: You do not need to judge your past or force a conclusion. Simply notice.

Allow several minutes of silence.

Participants may share one image, emotion, or invitation, but sharing should be optional.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice: What image of God has most shaped your spiritual instincts?

Receive: God is not merely watching from a distance. In Christ, God has come near; through the Spirit, God dwells within; through the Father, you are welcomed as beloved.

Practice: When you notice fear, performance, or self-monitoring this week, pause and pray:
“God is with me where I am.”

Share: Offer another person presence without evaluation, love without control, and companionship without pressure.

Closing question

What ache within you might actually be an invitation from the Spirit?

Closing prayer

*God of patient love,
meet us in what we remember
and reshape what we fear.
Where we have imagined you as distant, draw us near.
Where we have performed for love, teach us to receive.
Where our souls have ached for more,
reveal that ache as your invitation into shared life.
Father, Son, and Spirit,
form us in belovedness, communion, and love.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes

- ✓ Keep the tone gentle. Participants may be naming deeply ingrained fears, not merely changing theological opinions.
- ✓ Do not assign blame. People usually passed on what they themselves had received.
- ✓ Avoid creating a contest between doctrine and experience. The chapter calls for doctrine that leads to encounter and formation.
- ✓ Do not force vulnerability. The facilitator can invite reflection without requiring personal disclosure.
- ✓ Allow grief and relief to coexist. A larger image of God can bring joy while also awakening sadness over what was missed.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement: The ache produced by an incomplete image of God may become the Spirit's invitation into belonging, belovedness, and participation.

Chapter 4: I Am Who We Are

Session Six

This can be one session, but it may need to be 90 minutes. You may want to divide it into two only if the group wants to spend extended time with each Person of the Trinity, but that should be optional rather than recommended. Keeping the three movements together preserves the

chapter's central insight: these are not three separate stories, but one divine life moving toward, with, and within us.

Session purpose

This session helps participants encounter Father, Son, and Spirit as the shared presence of God: the Father's faithful "I AM," the Son's embodied "Here I am," and the Spirit's indwelling "I am with you." Participants will consider how this fuller vision changes the way they understand suffering, obedience, prayer, formation, and daily life with God.

Central truth

The triune God does not merely observe or direct us from a distance. The Father comes near, the Son enters our humanity, and the Spirit makes God's shared life a home within us.

Key movement

This session moves from: *God above and outside us* to *God moving toward us, walking with us, and dwelling within us*

Participants are invited to move from trying to live for God to learning to live with God.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the chapter and notice which movement—Father, Son, or Spirit—feels most needed personally.
- Choose selected passages rather than attempting to discuss every Scripture.
- Be prepared for the section on suffering to awaken grief or unresolved questions.
- Avoid treating Father, Son, and Spirit as three separate stages or roles. Continue emphasizing one shared divine life.
- Allow the chapter's final prayer to serve as the primary spiritual practice.
- Keep the conversation centered on presence rather than attempting to explain every technical aspect of the Trinity.

Suggested Scriptures

- Exodus 3:7–15
- Isaiah 43:1–5
- John 1:14–18
- John 8:54–59
- John 14:16–23
- Romans 8:9–17, 26–27

A shorter session could use Exodus 3, John 1, and John 14.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and reconnection — 10 minutes
- The Father's "I AM" — 15 minutes
- The Son's embodied "Here I am" — 20 minutes
- The Spirit's indwelling "I am with you" — 20 minutes
- Living with God and prayer — 15 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask: Which phrase from the chapter most stayed with you: "I AM," "Here I am," or "I am with you"?

Then:

- Which movement of divine presence do you most need right now?
- What did the chapter enlarge or clarify in your understanding of God?
- Did anything surprise or challenge you?

The facilitator might briefly name the chapter's structure: We will consider three movements of one shared divine presence—not three separate stories, but Father, Son, and Spirit moving toward us together.

The shared name of God

Read the opening reflection on "Their name forever praise we."

Ask:

- What did that lyric awaken in you?
- What does it mean to speak of God's one life shared in three voices?
- How is the Trinity the "grammar" of God's life?
- What is gained when we imagine God as relational rather than solitary?
- How does praise sometimes express mystery more fully than explanation?

There is no need to make the unusual hymn wording carry more technical theology than intended. Its value is that it awakens imagination and wonder.

The Father's "I AM"

Read Exodus 3:7–15.

Ask:

- What does God reveal about himself besides a name?
- What signs of attentiveness and nearness do you notice?
- How does "I AM" become "I am with you"?
- What is the difference between God as self-existent and God as distant?

- How does covenant language—“I will be your God, and you will be my people”—add belonging to presence?

Read portions of Isaiah 43:1–5.

Ask:

- What promises are made in this passage?
- What is not promised?
- What difference does “I will be with you” make when the waters or fire are not removed?
- Which words communicate belonging?
- What might it mean that God summons us by name?

A helpful summary: God’s presence does not always prevent suffering, but neither does suffering mean God has withdrawn.

The Son’s “Here I am”

The chapter uses Job’s question: “Do you have eyes of flesh?”

Ask:

- What is Job longing to know?
- Why does suffering make this question urgent?
- What changes when God takes on human flesh?
- What does Jesus know from within that could previously be known only as Creator?
- How does the Incarnation reveal the nature of divine empathy?

The statement that, at Job’s time, the answer was “Not yet” may prompt theological questions. The facilitator can keep the focus on incarnation:

The point is not that God lacked knowledge, but that in Jesus, God entered and experienced human life from within.

Read Hebrews 4:14–16 or Hebrews 10:5–7.

Ask:

- How does Jesus meet us in vulnerability and weakness?
- What does “Here I am” reveal about his self-giving posture?
- What comfort does the gospel offer when suffering remains unresolved?
- How is presence sometimes a deeper answer than explanation?

Allow room for participants to say that presence does not remove every question.

Jesus as the divine “I AM”

Select two or three of Jesus' "I am" statements from John.

Ask:

- What does each image offer?
- How does each invite participation rather than mere admiration?
- What would it mean to receive Jesus as bread, light, life, shepherd, or vine?
- Which image speaks most directly to your present spiritual need?
- How do these statements make divine life accessible?

Psalm 36:5–9 could be read slowly.

Ask: What do the images of feasting, drinking, refuge, fountain, and light communicate about participation in God?

Obedience without inferiority

Read Hebrews 10:5–7 or Philippians 2:5–11.

Ask:

- What does Jesus' "Here I am" reveal about obedience?
- What is the difference between humility and inferiority?
- Why does it matter that Jesus' incarnate obedience is not evidence that the Son is eternally less than the Father?
- How can obedience flow from mutual love rather than hierarchy?
- What might a human "Here I am" look like when it is rooted in trust and belovedness?

A concise facilitator clarification may be helpful: Jesus' obedience reveals the faithful shape of his fully human life. It does not make him less divine.

Mutual deference and delight

Ask:

- What do Jesus' words "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" suggest?
- How is mutual deference different from one-way submission?
- What might it mean that divine self-giving is rooted in delight rather than rank?
- How could this understanding reshape the ways we view leadership or relationships?
- Where do you see Father, Son, and Spirit acting together in Jesus' life?

The group does not need an extended debate about eternal relations within the Trinity. The formation question is more important:

- ❖ What kind of human relationships reflect mutual love, dignity, and self-giving?

The Spirit's "I am with you"

Read John 14:16–23 and one of the passages in Acts where the Spirit speaks.

Ask:

- What personal actions are attributed to the Spirit?
- What does the Spirit say and do?
- How does this challenge the idea of the Spirit as an impersonal force?
- What is the difference between the Spirit being near us and dwelling within us?
- What does it mean for God to make a home within us?
- How does the Spirit continue the presence of Jesus without simply replacing him?

Read aloud: "The triune life is now shared, not merely shown."

Then ask: What does that sentence mean to you?

Formation as shared life

Invite participants to look at the chapter's descriptions of the Spirit's work: forming desire, restoring identity, cultivating awareness, producing fruit, healing wounds, awakening justice, guiding in community, and empowering unity.

Ask:

- Which work of the Spirit do you most need or recognize?
- How is fruit different from a task list?
- What is the difference between self-generated virtue and the Spirit's life growing within us?
- How might the Spirit integrate wounds without erasing them?
- How does guidance through Scripture, inward witness, and community protect against extreme individualism?
- Why is the Spirit necessary for unity?

A useful summary: Formation involves our response and participation, but its life and power are not self-generated.

Prayer from within

Read Romans 8:26–27.

Ask:

- What does this passage suggest about prayer when we have no words?

- What changes if prayer is conversation with the God who dwells within rather than communication sent toward a distant God?
- How does the Spirit teach our own “Here I am”?
- Have you experienced prayer more as being held than as speaking?
- What would it mean to enter prayer as participation rather than initiation?

Living with God

Read aloud: “We cannot live the Christian life for God; we can only live it with God.”

Ask:

- What is the difference between living for God and living with God?
- Which description better reflects your spiritual habits?
- How might living for God lead to pressure or self-reliance?
- How might living with God reshape work, obedience, service, or rest?
- What ordinary moment this week could become an occasion for shared presence?

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose those best suited to the group.

Understanding

- How does the Father’s “I AM” become a promise of presence?
- What does the Incarnation reveal about God’s relationship to human suffering?
- How do Jesus’ “I am” statements invite participation?
- Why is incarnate obedience different from eternal inferiority?
- What does the Spirit’s indwelling add to our understanding of God’s nearness?
- How does formation arise from shared life?

Personal reflection

- Which movement of divine presence do you most need?
- Where have you experienced God as faithful presence?
- What suffering or limitation do you need Jesus to meet from within?
- Does the Spirit feel personal and present to you, or vague and distant?
- Is it easier for you to live for God or with God?
- Where are you longing for God to make a home more fully within you?

Formation

- How might the Father’s presence reshape fear?
- How might the Son’s empathy reshape suffering?
- How might the Spirit’s indwelling reshape prayer?

- What desire might the Spirit be forming within you?
- What practice could help you become more attentive to God's presence?
- How might your "Here I am" become a response to God's prior "I am with you"?

Spiritual practice

Use the chapter's "Prayer of Shared Presence" slowly and spaciously.

The facilitator might introduce it by saying: *As each Person is named, notice which words bring comfort, resistance, longing, or invitation. We are not addressing three separate gods, but receiving the one shared presence of Father, Son, and Spirit.*

Pause after each section of the prayer.

Afterward, allow a time of silence.

Participants may share:

- one phrase that stood out,
- one movement of God they especially need,
- or one way they feel invited to respond, "Here I am."

Sharing should remain optional.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Which movement of divine presence—Father, Son, or Spirit—feels most distant or most needed?

Receive

The Father is faithfully near, the Son knows human life from within, and the Spirit makes God's shared life a home within you.

Practice

Pause once each day and pray simply:

Great I AM, you are with me.

Jesus, you meet me here.

Spirit, breathe within me.

Here I am.

Share

Offer another person the gift of faithful presence without trying to solve, manage, or explain their experience.

Closing question

What might change if you understood the Christian life not primarily as something you live for God, but as a life you live with God?

Closing prayer

Use the prayer in the chapter. The final lines could be repeated by the whole group:

*Triune God, my Father, Son, and Spirit,
teach me not to live for you,
but with you.
Shape my "Here I am"
into trust, belonging, and love.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ Keep the Father, Son, and Spirit together. The three movements provide structure, but the chapter's claim is one shared divine life.
- ✓ Be tender with suffering. Do not imply that awareness of God's presence resolves grief, trauma, or unanswered prayer.
- ✓ Clarify the Incarnation carefully. God did not lack knowledge before becoming human; in Christ, God personally entered embodied human experience.
- ✓ Do not let the session become primarily a debate over hierarchy. State the distinction between incarnate obedience and divine inferiority, then return to presence and formation.
- ✓ Allow the Spirit to be described personally. The chapter emphasizes speaking, guiding, comforting, interceding, and indwelling—not vague spiritual energy.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement:
The Father says, "I AM."
The Son embodies, "Here I am."
The Spirit assures, "I am with you."
And we are formed to answer, "Here I am."

Chapter 5: When God is Too Small: The Cost of an Incomplete Trinity

Session Seven

This chapter is more technical, but it has one central theme: showing how a diminished or hierarchical vision of God distorts formation, authority, community, and eventually atonement. The facilitator should not try to resolve every debated passage. The goal is to help participants see why the way we imagine God matters so much for the way we organize human life.

The chapter could easily become overly academic if every term and disputed text receives equal attention. The facilitator should choose a few key ideas, allow the sidebar material to support rather than dominate the conversation, and keep bringing the group back to the practical question:

What kind of people and communities are formed by the God we imagine?

Session purpose

This session helps participants recognize how a distant, divided, or hierarchical image of God can shape identity, leadership, gender relationships, church structures, political imagination, and salvation itself. Participants are invited to consider the Trinity as shared life without domination and to examine whether their images of authority reflect the self-giving way of Christ.

Central truth

When hierarchy is projected into God's eternal life, it can become a sacred pattern for domination. The Trinity instead reveals shared authority, mutual indwelling, self-giving love, and glory without inferiority.

Key movement

This session moves from: *distance, rank, and control* to *communion, mutuality, and shared life*. It also prepares the way for the atonement chapters by showing that our understanding of salvation grows from our understanding of God.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the chapter carefully, especially the sections on eternal hierarchy, incarnational obedience, and the right hand of God.
- Decide which one or two technical texts are most important for the group.
- Avoid trying to teach every theological distinction in detail.
- Be prepared for questions about gender, authority, submission, politics, and church leadership.
- Keep the tone pastoral rather than combative.

- Acknowledge that sincere Christians interpret some of these passages differently.
- Emphasize that the primary concern is not merely who wins an argument, but what vision of God and human life a reading produces.
- Use the reflective exercise at the end rather than adding another spiritual practice.

Suggested Scriptures

- John 1:14–18
- John 5:19–23
- John 10:30
- John 14:9–11, 28
- Philippians 2:5–11
- Revelation 3:21
- Luke 4:16–21
- John 13:1–17

A shorter session could focus on Philippians 2, Revelation 3:21, and John 13.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and reconnection — 10 minutes
- When God is distant — 10 minutes
- Communion versus hierarchy — 20 minutes
- Reading key texts carefully — 20 minutes
- The social and spiritual consequences — 15 minutes
- Preparing for atonement and reflective exercise — 15 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask: What part of this chapter felt most important, surprising, or difficult?

Then:

- Did any section challenge a familiar image of God?
- Where did you feel agreement, resistance, or uncertainty?
- What connection did you notice between theology and human systems?

A helpful framing sentence: We do not need to solve every disputed text tonight. We are asking what happens when rank and domination become part of our picture of God.

When God is too small

Read aloud: “When our vision of God is too small, it cannot carry the weight of real life or bring rest to our souls.”

Ask:

- What makes an image of God “too small”?
- How might a distant God produce self-reliance?
- What is missing when Jesus is imagined mainly as a coach on the sidelines?
- How does performance replace belonging?
- Why might suffering feel like abandonment when participation is absent?

Then ask:

What is the difference between being coached by Jesus and sharing life with Christ?

The formational contrast. The chapter contrasts two visions:

A solitary, distant ruler tends to form:

- fear,
- control,
- self-reliance,
- uniformity,
- anxiety,
- performance.

A relational, incarnational, indwelling God tends to form:

- trust,
- mutuality,
- embodiment,
- communion,
- hope,
- participation.

Ask: (choose questions you feel most helpful for your group)

- Which contrast feels most significant?
- Where have you experienced faith as misalignment or strain?
- How can conviction become evidence of failure rather than invitation toward healing?
- What happens when unity becomes uniformity?
- How might a relational vision of God produce a different kind of obedience?

From communion to hierarchy

Read aloud: “When we have a one-person imagination of God, subordination easily sneaks in.”

Ask:

- Why might a solitary image of God make hierarchy seem natural?

- How can authority become separated from relationship?
- What happens when leadership is imagined mainly as rank or chain of command?
- How can theology give divine permission to structures we already prefer?
- What is the difference between distinction and inequality?

A useful summary:

The Trinity contains distinction, but distinction does not require domination or unequal worth.

“Begotten” without inferiority

The facilitator may briefly explain: In historic Christian theology, “begotten” does not mean created later, ranked beneath, or less divine. It names the Son’s eternal relationship with the Father.

Ask:

- What assumptions do we bring to the word *begotten*?
- How does “light from light” challenge an image of lesser divinity?
- Why does it matter that the Son shares the Father’s glory rather than earning it?
- How might the language of belovedness help us hear this relationship differently?

There is no need to spend extensive time on the Greek term unless the group asks.

Incarnational obedience

Read Philippians 2:5–11 or Hebrews 5:8.

Ask:

- What does Jesus freely embrace in becoming human?
- What does his obedience reveal about divine humility?
- Why is chosen self-giving different from imposed inferiority?
- What is the difference between obedience as participation in love and obedience as appeasement?
- How could we misuse Jesus’ humility to require powerlessness from others?

A helpful clarification:

Jesus’ self-emptying should not be used to tell vulnerable people that accepting domination is godly. His self-giving is freely chosen love exercised from full dignity.

What about authority?

Ask:

- Does rejecting domination mean rejecting all authority?

- What does authority look like when framed by love and shared life?
- How does Jesus redefine greatness?
- What is the difference between authority that serves and authority that controls?
- How might submission be freely chosen without becoming a permanent identity assigned to one group?
- What makes leadership trustworthy?

The facilitator may summarize:

The chapter does not erase leadership, obedience, or yielding. It asks how they function and whether they reflect Christ's self-giving love.

Reading through hierarchical lenses

Ask:

- What cultural images shape the way we hear authority language?
- How might corporate structures, patriarchy, nationalism, or social rank affect biblical interpretation?
- Why can hierarchy remain operative even when equality is verbally affirmed?
- Have you encountered the phrase "equal but different" in a setting where the practical relationship was still unequal?
- How do we tell the difference between reading hierarchy from Scripture and reading hierarchy into Scripture?

This is an important place to keep the discussion self-reflective rather than accusatory.

The right hand of God

The sidebar can be handled briefly.

Ask:

What did you learn or notice about the biblical image of Christ at God's right hand?

Then clarify:

In biblical royal imagery, the right hand represents shared authority, victory, honor, and participation in rule—not merely the position of a subordinate assistant.

Read Revelation 3:21.

Ask:

- What does it mean that Jesus sits with the Father on the throne?
- How does this image differ from a chair below or beside the throne?
- What does the shared throne communicate about Christ's authority and glory?

- *How might our Western phrase “right-hand man” distort the biblical image?*

That is likely enough. The guide need not lead a lengthy study of every right-hand passage.

The difficult texts

The facilitator may select only one or two.

For 1 Corinthians 11:3:

- What changes when the full passage, including verses 11–12, is considered?
- How do mutual dependence and “everything comes from God” affect the reading?
- Why does the meaning of “head” matter?
- What happens when one disputed word carries an entire system of hierarchy?

For John 14:28:

- How should “the Father is greater than I” be read alongside “I and the Father are one”?
- What difference does the incarnation make?
- Could Jesus be speaking from within his embodied mission rather than defining eternal inferiority?
- Why should one verse not erase the wider witness of John?

The facilitator should not imply that the group must become experts. The main point is:

Context matters, and incarnational language should not automatically be projected into an eternal chain of command.

When an unequal God damages

The chapter names patriarchy, misogyny, racial hierarchy, colonial theology, economic injustice, immigration injustice, and unequal ecclesiology.

Ask:

- Why does an image of God never remain private or abstract?
- How can theology provide sacred justification for domination?
- What happens when social systems claim to reflect divine order?
- Where do we see people described as equal in worth but permanently unequal in voice or authority?
- Why are these issues especially urgent in an “empire” climate?
- How can religious language make control appear righteous?

This section is important, but the facilitator should avoid turning it into a broad political debate. A helpful focus is:

Where do power, superiority, or control disguise themselves as faithfulness?

Jesus turns hierarchy upside down

Read Luke 4:18–19 or John 13:1–17.

Ask:

- Whom does Jesus center?
- How does Jesus use power?
- What does foot washing reveal about divine authority?
- How does Jesus treat those considered socially lesser?
- What would a church shaped by this kind of authority look like?
- How does shared honor differ from the pursuit of status?

Read aloud: “In the life of God, love is shared, not controlled.”

Then ask:

What would change if this became a governing conviction for Christian leadership and community?

Why this matters before atonement

Read: “A diminished vision of God inevitably gives rise to a diminished vision of salvation.”

Ask:

- How might a distant and hierarchical God lead to a transactional view of salvation?
- If God’s eternal life is shared love, what might salvation be for?
- Is salvation mainly a way to manage distance, or an invitation into communion?
- How does our view of authority shape the way we imagine the cross?
- What questions does this chapter raise for the coming discussion of atonement?

A helpful transition:

Before asking what the cross accomplishes, we must ask what kind of God acts in and through the cross.

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose only those most appropriate.

Understanding

- How does a one-person imagination of God make hierarchy seem natural?
- What does “begotten” mean if it does not imply inferiority?
- Why should Jesus’ submission be understood in light of the incarnation?

- What does the right hand of God symbolize?
- How does Jesus redefine authority?
- Why are Trinity and atonement inseparable?

Personal reflection

- What image of God arises when you fail or feel uncertain?
- Have you imagined Jesus as a coach outside you or as Christ within you?
- Where has hierarchy felt natural or unquestionable?
- What forms of authority have helped you flourish?
- What forms of authority have diminished you or others?
- Where do you feel tension between inherited teaching and the self-giving way of Christ?

Formation

- How might belonging replace performance?
- How can authority be exercised without domination?
- Where might you need to relinquish control?
- Where might you need to resist falsely spiritualized inferiority?
- How could mutuality shape your relationships or church community?
- What image of God needs to be loosened before you consider atonement?

Reflective practice

Use the chapter's own exercise.

Invite participants to consider:

- What image of God naturally arises in struggle, failure, or uncertainty?
- Where does faith feel strained, forced, or fear-driven?
- What images of authority, evaluation, or distance might need to loosen?
- What might it mean to receive God as shared life, mutual delight, and co-suffering love?
- What kind of God could carry the weight of your real life?

Allow several minutes of silence.

Participants may share one image they wish to loosen and one they wish to receive, but sharing should remain optional.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where has hierarchy, distance, or control entered your picture of God?

Receive

Father, Son, and Spirit share one divine life without domination, inferiority, or grasping for control.

Practice

When you encounter authority this week—your own or someone else’s—ask:

Does this reflect self-giving love, shared dignity, and the way of Christ?

Share

Use whatever influence you carry to create space, dignity, voice, or belonging for someone who is easily overlooked.

Closing question

What becomes possible when God is no longer imagined as a boss with a chain of command, but as shared life, mutual delight, and self-giving love?

Closing prayer

Use the prayer from the chapter:

*God of shared life,
release me from images that no longer fit.
Re-form my heart in your love,
that my faith may grow not from fear,
but from participation in the life we share.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ Do not try to cover every text. One or two well-chosen passages will serve the group better than a hurried survey.
- ✓ Acknowledge interpretive differences. Participants may come from traditions that affirm some form of eternal ordering within the Trinity. Keep the discussion centered on the character of divine authority and the rejection of domination.
- ✓ Do not let technical language hide the pastoral stakes. The real issue is how theology shapes souls, relationships, institutions, and societies.
- ✓ Avoid equating every structure or leadership role with oppression. The chapter critiques domination, fixed inferiority, and authority detached from mutual love.
- ✓ Do not allow *kenosis* or submission language to be used against people experiencing abuse. Chosen self-giving is not the same as coerced powerlessness.

- ✓ Keep current political implications present but not consuming. The chapter matters in an empire climate because religious images can legitimize control, superiority, nationalism, exclusion, and the silencing of vulnerable people. The facilitator need not debate every contemporary issue to make that connection.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement:

The God we imagine becomes the pattern we tend to reproduce. A hierarchical God can sanctify domination; the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit forms us toward mutuality, dignity, and self-giving love.

Chapter 6: Atonement: Beyond Sin Management

The chapter contains two major movements: first, reconsidering inherited atonement frameworks and the meaning of Jesus' cry from Psalm 22; second, receiving atonement as participation in shared suffering, shared life, and shared glory.

Recommended pacing

Two sessions of approximately 75–90 minutes each.

First session: Beyond punishment and divine abandonment

Second session: Atonement as shared life, shared suffering, and shared glory

The facilitator should remind the group that the goal is not to become experts in every atonement theory. The aim is to notice how different views shape our image of God and to receive a fuller, Trinitarian vision of salvation.

Session Eight: Beyond punishment and divine abandonment

Session Eight purpose

This session helps participants examine the atonement framework they may have inherited, appreciate what penal substitution seeks to protect, and consider its possible formational limitations. It explores Jesus' cry from Psalm 22 and invites the group to see the cross not as a rupture within God, but as the Triune God entering human anguish without abandoning divine communion.

Central truth

The cross does not reveal the Father abandoning the Son. It reveals the undivided Triune God entering the full depth of human suffering in self-giving love.

Key movement

This session moves from: *punishment, transaction, and divine division* to *lament, reconciliation, and shared suffering* within the unbroken life of God.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read through the section ending with “Historical Agreement.”
- Review the atonement models without feeling responsible to teach each one fully.
- Be prepared for strong emotional attachment to penal substitution.
- Avoid mocking or dismissing a model that has brought gratitude and assurance to many.
- Keep asking what each model reveals and what it may obscure.
- Read Psalm 22 in full before the session.
- Be ready to distinguish felt abandonment from an actual rupture within the Trinity.
- Protect participants from feeling that their earlier faith was false. The invitation is toward enlargement.

Suggested Scriptures

- Psalm 22
- Matthew 27:35–46
- John 19:23–30
- 2 Corinthians 5:18–21
- Hebrews 2:14–18
- Hebrews 4:14–16
- Hebrews 9:14

A shorter session could focus on Psalm 22, Matthew 27, and Hebrews 9:14.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and response to the chapter — 10 minutes
- What atonement means and the range of models — 20 minutes
- Penal substitution: strengths and limitations — 20 minutes
- Psalm 22 and Jesus’ cry — 25 minutes
- The Triune presence at the cross — 10 minutes
- Closing reflection and prayer — 5 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask: What did you assume atonement meant before reading this chapter?

Then:

- Which part of the chapter felt most familiar?
- Which part felt relieving, unsettling, or difficult?

- Did you realize that your view of atonement had shaped your image of God?
- What questions did the chapter awaken?

A helpful framing sentence: We are not deciding that one image says nothing true and another says everything. We are asking what story each model tells about God, sin, salvation, and the Christian life.

What is atonement?

Ask:

- What words come to mind when you hear *atonement*?
- Did you primarily understand it as payment, forgiveness, reunion, healing, liberation, victory, or something else?
- What changes when atonement is understood as “at-one-ment” or reunion?
- How is forgiveness included within, but not equal to, the whole meaning of salvation?
- What would it mean for atonement to be a life we enter rather than only a fact we affirm?

The models of atonement

Invite participants to look at the chart.

Ask:

- Which model most shaped your faith?
- Which one feels newest?
- What truth does each model preserve?
- What does each model emphasize about sin?
- What image of God does each model communicate?
- Which models seem most connected to formation and daily life?

The facilitator need not explain every historic theory. The chart’s purpose is to show that Scripture uses several images and no single model carries the whole meaning of salvation.

A useful summary:

Different models may function like windows. Each can reveal something, but problems arise when one window is treated as the entire house.

What penal substitution gets right

Ask:

- What important truths does penal substitution seek to protect?
- Why does the seriousness of sin matter?

- How has this model produced humility or gratitude?
- Why should the costliness of the cross not be minimized?
- What might be lost if atonement is reduced to moral influence alone?

This keeps the conversation fair and lowers defensiveness.

Formational consequences

Ask:

- What emotional picture is created by the courtroom scene described in the chapter?
- How might the Father appear different from the Son in that picture?
- What happens when punishment becomes the controlling center of the cross?
- How might gratitude coexist with fear?
- How can obedience become appeasement?
- What happens when atonement is something to accept once rather than a life of communion to enter?

Read aloud: “The cross can appear as the solution to a problem within God rather than the revelation of God’s own life of love.”

Then ask:

What difference is there between those two understandings?

Did God forsake himself?

Ask:

- What were you taught was happening between the Father and Son at the cross?
- Did you imagine the Father turning away?
- What theological questions arise if Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally one?
- Can the Trinity fracture and still be the Trinity?
- What does it mean to say, “God does not abandon God”?

The facilitator should not minimize Jesus’ anguish. The question is not whether Jesus truly experienced human forsakenness, but whether the Father ontologically separated from the Son.

Jesus’ cry of lament

Read Matthew 27:46 and then Psalm 22.

Ask:

- What emotions are expressed in the opening of the psalm?
- Does lament indicate unbelief, or can it be an act of faith?
- What does the repeated address “My God” reveal?

- How does the psalm move from anguish toward trust, proclamation, and vindication?
- What is the difference between feeling abandoned and being abandoned?
- How does Jesus enter the experience of those who feel forsaken?

Read aloud: “This is what is happening. This is what I feel. This is how it hurts. And you are still my God.”

Ask:

How might that description change the way we understand lament?

The whole Psalm at the cross

Invite participants to notice the connections between Psalm 22 and the crucifixion narratives:

- mockers shaking their heads,
- taunts about trusting God,
- garments divided,
- thirst,
- the movement toward vindication,
- the final proclamation that God has acted.

Ask:

- What changes when Jesus’ opening words are heard as invoking the whole psalm?
- Why would a first-century Jewish audience recognize an opening line as summoning the entire prayer?
- How does the psalm’s ending affect the meaning of the beginning?
- What resonance do you hear between “He has done it” and “It is finished”?
- Does this remove the anguish, or place it inside a larger movement of trust and victory?

The facilitator should avoid claiming that every detail is beyond debate. The central insight is that Psalm 22 does not end in abandonment.

The Triune presence at the cross

Read Hebrews 9:14:

Christ offers himself to God through the eternal Spirit.

Ask:

- Where do you see Father, Son, and Spirit in this verse?
- How does it challenge the image of an isolated Son?
- What does it mean to say the Triune God suffers as one?
- How can God enter death without divine life being extinguished?

- What does the cross reveal about God's willingness to be present in the worst of human suffering?

A helpful summary:

The Father is not standing at a safe distance, the Spirit has not withdrawn, and the Son is not abandoned outside divine communion. The Triune God enters suffering without ceasing to be one.

Core discussion questions for Session One

The facilitator should choose only those most helpful.

Understanding

- What does atonement mean beyond payment?
- Why might no single atonement model be sufficient?
- What does penal substitution preserve?
- What formational problems can arise when punishment becomes central?
- Why can the Trinity not be divided?
- How does Psalm 22 reshape Jesus' cry of forsakenness?

Personal reflection

- What emotional image of God did your atonement teaching create?
- Did the cross make you feel loved, afraid, grateful, indebted, secure, or conflicted?
- Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
- Does lament feel faithful or dangerous to you?
- What changes when Jesus is understood as praying your anguish from within it?
- What part of the old framework is difficult to release?

Formation

- How might atonement become a life to enter?
- What would change if the cross revealed divine solidarity rather than divine rejection?
- How could lament become part of prayer?
- What fear might loosen if God does not abandon God?
- How could this understanding affect the way you accompany someone who suffers?

Spiritual practice

Invite participants to sit with Psalm 22.

The facilitator may say:

Bring to God one place where you have felt alone, unheard, or forsaken. You do not need to resolve it. Simply tell the truth from within relationship.

Pause between each line:

- *This is what is happening.*
- *This is what I feel.*
- *This is how it hurts.*
- *And you are still my God.*

Allow several minutes of silence.

Close:

Jesus, faithful sufferer, hold our lament within your own.

Triune God, meet us in the places where absence feels real, and teach us to trust that your shared life has not let us go. Amen.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

What story about God has your understanding of the cross been telling?

Receive

Jesus enters the full experience of human forsakenness without being abandoned outside the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Practice

Pray one honest lament this week without trying to fix or soften it.

Share

Sit with someone's pain without explaining why it happened or rushing them toward resolution.

Closing question

What changes if the cross is not the place where God turns away, but the place where God enters human suffering most completely?

Session Nine: Atonement as shared life, shared suffering, and shared glory

Session Nine purpose

This session helps participants understand atonement as the Triune God's restorative movement toward humanity: entering violence and suffering, healing broken communion, uniting humanity

with Christ, and drawing us from shared suffering into shared glory. Participants are invited to see salvation not only as something done for them, but as a life in which they participate through the Spirit.

Central truth

Atonement is the Triune God entering human brokenness to restore communion and draw humanity into Christ's faithful life, death, resurrection, ascension, and glory.

Key movement

This session moves from: *salvation as an external transaction completed outside us* to *salvation as forgiveness, healing, liberation, union, participation, and new creation*.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read from "A Trinitarian Atonement" through the end of the chapter.
- Review Romans 6:3–11 and Genesis 15.
- Be prepared to explain participation without making it sound like human achievement.
- Avoid implying that Jesus is only an example or fellow sufferer.
- Hold together substitution and participation rather than forcing an unnecessary either/or.
- Remember that the Ascension will receive fuller attention in the next chapter.
- Use the chapter's prayer as the closing spiritual practice.

Suggested Scriptures

- Genesis 15:1–18
- Romans 6:3–11
- 2 Corinthians 5:14–21
- Colossians 1:19–22, 27
- Hebrews 2:9–18
- Hebrews 10:5–10
- Galatians 2:19–20
- Romans 8:14–17

A shorter session could focus on Genesis 15, Romans 6, and 2 Corinthians 5.

Suggested session flow:

- Reconnection and review — 10 minutes
- A Trinitarian atonement — 20 minutes
- Sacrifice, violence, and covenant solidarity — 20 minutes
- Participation in death and resurrection — 20 minutes

- Shared suffering to shared glory — 15 minutes
- Prayer of participation — 10 minutes

Reconnecting with Session One

Ask:

- What stayed with you from the discussion of Psalm 22?
- Did anything shift in the way you imagined the cross?
- Were you able to pray lament differently?
- What questions remain about punishment, substitution, or divine unity?

A Trinitarian atonement

Read aloud: “Jesus didn’t come to fix God’s anger. He came to bring us back into relationship.”

Ask:

- What does this sentence affirm?
- What does it challenge?
- How does restoration differ from appeasement?
- What does it mean to say that love is the source of salvation rather than the result of a penalty being paid?
- How do Father, Son, and Spirit act together in salvation?
- What is preserved when atonement is described as forgiveness and infinitely more?

A useful summary:

The cross does not persuade an unwilling God to love. The cross is the action of the God who already loves.

“Here I am” at the cross

Invite the group to consider the statements attributed to Father and Son in the chapter.

Ask:

- How does “Here I am” communicate presence and availability?
- What does Jesus surrender in Gethsemane and at the cross?
- How does the Father’s faithful presence hold the Son’s human surrender?
- What does “Into your hands I commit my spirit” reveal about trust?
- How might our own “Here I am” be held within Jesus’ faithful offering?

Read aloud: “This is where I AM meets Here I am.”

Ask:

What does this convergence mean for atonement and formation?

Substitution and participation

The chapter says Jesus' suffering is not only substitutionary, but participatory.

Ask:

- What truth does substitution preserve?
- What does participation add?
- What is lost if Jesus acts only outside us?
- What is lost if Jesus becomes only an example for us to imitate?
- How does the Spirit include us in Christ's faithful life?
- What does it mean that Jesus acts for us, with us, and ahead of us?

A helpful clarification:

Participation does not mean that we complete Christ's saving work. It means that Christ's completed work opens a life into which the Spirit joins us.

The cross as the meeting of divine and human availability

Ask:

- Where do "I AM" and "Here I am" meet throughout Scripture?
- What do Abraham, Moses, Hagar, Samuel, Mary, and Jesus reveal about availability?
- Why is surrender relational rather than passive?
- How is "Here I am" different from resignation?
- What becomes possible when trust is offered without complete answers?

The facilitator can mention Appendix C without exploring every example.

The purpose of sacrifice

Read the section on sacrifice.

Ask:

- What assumptions do modern readers bring to sacrifice?
- What changes when sacrifice is understood in terms of purification, restoration, covenant, and renewed communion?
- Why might punishment and sacrifice not be identical concepts?
- How does Hebrews portray Jesus as faithful Son and high priest rather than merely as a victim?
- What does sacrifice make possible relationally?

The facilitator need not provide a full history of Israel's sacrificial system. The important point is: Sacrifice serves restored access and communion; it is not simply punishment transferred to another.

A nonviolent atonement

Ask:

- What does the cross expose about human violence?
- How does Jesus absorb violence without mirroring it?
- What powers are unmasked at the cross?
- What is the difference between God demanding violence and God entering violence to overcome it?
- How might a nonviolent vision of atonement form Christians differently?
- What would restorative justice look like compared with retribution?

A needed caution: Nonviolent atonement does not mean that sin, evil, or injustice are treated lightly. It means that God defeats evil without becoming like it.

Genesis 15 and covenant solidarity

Read or summarize Genesis 15:7–18.

Ask:

- What is the significance of God passing through the covenant pieces?
- What does it mean for God to bear the cost of covenant faithfulness?
- How does this scene anticipate the self-giving love revealed at the cross?
- What is the difference between demanding payment from another and taking covenant cost upon oneself?
- How does this reveal divine loyalty?

Read aloud: “God’s presence. God’s loyalty. God’s covenant love poured out in the deepest act of solidarity.”

Ask:

Which of those words most reshapes your view of the cross?

Participation in death, burial, and resurrection

Read Romans 6:3–11.

Ask:

- What language of union or participation appears?

- Is baptism presented only as receiving forgiveness, or as entering Christ's story?
- What does it mean to be united with Christ in death and resurrection?
- How does this move atonement from the past into present formation?
- What old life is being left behind?
- What new life becomes possible?

A helpful clarification:

Baptism is not magic water or a human achievement. It is an embodied response of surrender and trust in which the Spirit joins us to Christ's death and risen life.

Life in Christ

Invite participants to notice Paul's recurring language:

- in Christ,
- with Christ,
- Christ in you,
- in the Spirit.

Ask:

- What does this language communicate beyond imitation?
- How does union change the meaning of Christian identity?
- What is the difference between following Christ from a distance and living in Christ?
- How does participation preserve freedom rather than override it?
- What does it mean to receive the life being offered?

From shared suffering to shared glory

Read Hebrews 2:9–11 or Romans 8:14–17.

Ask:

- How are suffering and glory connected?
- How does resurrection answer the cross?
- Why does the embodied, risen Jesus matter?
- What does it mean that Jesus carries humanity into God's presence?
- How does this enlarge salvation beyond forgiveness?
- What hope does this offer for the body, creation, and the future?

The facilitator should avoid getting too far into the Ascension material, since the next chapter will explore it fully.

A brief summary is enough:

The cross is not the endpoint. Resurrection and Ascension reveal where Christ is carrying humanity—into shared life and glory.

Why this changes formation

Read aloud: “Formation is simply learning to live inside the love of Father, Son, and Spirit.”

Ask:

- What changes when formation begins with participation rather than performance?
- How do prayer, baptism, lament, obedience, and community become ways of living within Christ’s life?
- What would it mean for your “Here I am” to be held within God’s “Here I AM”?
- Where are you tired of trying to save or transform yourself?
- What life are you being invited to receive?

Core discussion questions for Session Nine

Understanding

- What makes atonement Trinitarian?
- How are substitution and participation related?
- What was sacrifice intended to accomplish?
- How does the cross expose and overcome violence?
- What does Genesis 15 reveal about covenant faithfulness?
- How does Romans 6 describe participation?
- Why must resurrection and Ascension belong to atonement?

Personal reflection

- Do you relate to the cross mainly through gratitude, fear, sorrow, hope, or belonging?
- Where do you need God’s solidarity?
- What suffering do you need Christ to carry with you?
- Is it easier to admire Jesus’ sacrifice or receive his life?
- Where do you resist saying “Here I am”?
- What part of salvation now feels larger?

Formation

- How can lament become participation?
- What would it mean to live from union with Christ?
- How might a nonviolent atonement reshape conflict or justice?
- What fear-driven behavior may need to give way to communion?
- How could baptismal identity shape daily life?

- What practice helps you remember that you are in Christ and Christ is in you?

Spiritual practice

Use the chapter's "Prayer of Participation" slowly.

The facilitator may introduce it: *We bring our small, incomplete "Here I am" into the faithful life of Jesus. We are not offering perfect surrender. We are receiving the life already opened to us.*

Pause after each section.

Allow several minutes of silence following:

I am here.

And you are with me.

Participants may share one word, fear, wound, or invitation they brought into the prayer, but sharing should remain optional.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where do you still approach salvation as something you must secure, repay, or prove?

Receive

The Triune God has entered human suffering, restored communion, and opened Christ's death and risen life for you to share.

Practice

Once each day, pray:

Faithful God, here I am.

Hold my life inside your shared life.

Share

Enter another person's pain through faithful presence rather than distance, judgment, or easy explanation.

Closing question

What would it mean to stop merely admiring Christ's sacrifice and begin receiving the shared life his saving work opens?

Facilitator notes for both sessions:

- ✓ *Do not rush. These sessions may overturn deeply rooted images of God and salvation.*
- ✓ *Honor what participants received through penal substitution while making space to examine its limitations.*
- ✓ *Avoid suggesting that sin, justice, sacrifice, or substitution do not matter. The chapter seeks a larger framework, not a trivialization of evil.*
- ✓ *Keep Father, Son, and Spirit united. The cross is not the Father acting against the Son, but the Triune God acting together for humanity.*
- ✓ *Allow lament to remain lament. Psalm 22's movement toward victory should not be used to silence anguish.*
- ✓ *Do not make participation sound like self-salvation. Participation is the Spirit-enabled reception of Christ's completed work and shared life.*
- ✓ *Hold cross, resurrection, and Ascension together. Atonement is not complete as a theological vision if it ends at death.*
- ✓ *Keep returning to the central movement:*
- ✓ *Atonement is not less than forgiveness or substitution. It is God's restorative, liberating, healing work that brings humanity through Christ's suffering and death into resurrection, communion, and shared glory.*

Chapter 7: The Ascension: Humanity Carried Into Glory

The facilitator should resist the urge to explain every detail of Hebrews. (Well, that should be encouraging 😊) The goal is not to establish a complete theory of heavenly sacrifice, but to help participants grasp why the living, ascended, embodied Christ matters for belonging, formation, hope, and unity.

Session Ten: The Ascension and What that has to do with us

Session purpose

This session helps participants recover the Ascension as an essential part of Christ's saving work. It explores Jesus as the living and sympathetic High Priest who carries human life into God's presence, opens access to divine communion, and gives embodied hope for the renewal of creation.

Central truth

In the Ascension, Jesus does not discard humanity but carries it into the shared life of God. Our salvation therefore includes not only forgiveness, but access, union, transformation, and embodied hope.

Key movement

This session moves from: *the Ascension as Jesus' departure to the Ascension as enthronement, priestly presence, and humanity carried into glory*

It also moves from: *trying to attain union to learning to live from the union Christ has already opened*

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the chapter without feeling responsible to master every detail of Hebrews.
- Focus on the larger theological and formational movement.
- Review Hebrews 4:14–16, 7:23–28, 9:11–14, and Ephesians 2:4–7.
- Be prepared to explain that “ongoing atonement” does not mean Jesus is repeatedly sacrificed.
- Distinguish the completed sacrifice from Christ’s continuing priestly ministry.
- Avoid turning the session into a technical debate about the location or mechanics of the heavenly sanctuary.
- Let the chapter’s emphasis on access, embodiment, hope, and shared glory remain central.
- Remember that the detailed comparison of atonement views is available in Appendix D for interested participants.

Suggested Scriptures

- Hebrews 4:14–16
- Hebrews 7:23–28
- Hebrews 9:11–14, 23–28
- Romans 8:31–34
- Ephesians 2:4–7
- Acts 2:32–36
- 1 Peter 2:4–5
- Philippians 3:20–21

A shorter session could focus on Hebrews 4, Hebrews 9, and Ephesians 2.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and initial response — 10 minutes
- Jesus as the living High Priest — 20 minutes
- Resurrection, Ascension, and atonement — 20 minutes

- Humanity carried into glory — 20 minutes
- Formation, unity, and new creation — 15 minutes
- Closing reflection and prayer — 5 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask: Before reading this chapter, what did you think happened at the Ascension, and why did you think it mattered?

Then:

- Did you imagine Jesus as still embodied?
- What idea in the chapter surprised you most?
- Which part felt difficult to understand?
- Which part felt personally hopeful?

A useful framing statement:

We do not need to understand every detail of heavenly priesthood tonight. We are listening for what Hebrews tells us about the living Christ and what his Ascension means for us.

The Ascension as more than departure

Ask:

- Have you tended to think of the Ascension as Jesus leaving?
- What changes when it is understood as enthronement and entry into God's presence?
- Why might resurrection without Ascension leave the story unfinished?
- How is Ascension different from escape from the material world?
- What does it mean to say that it is the beginning of new creation?

Read aloud: "The cross is not the end. It is the doorway."

Ask:

What lies beyond that doorway in the chapter's vision?

Jesus as the sympathetic High Priest

Read Hebrews 4:14–16.

Ask:

- What qualifies Jesus to be our High Priest?
- Why does his human experience matter?
- What does it mean that he sympathizes with weakness?
- What kind of God do we approach at the throne of grace?

- How does mercy and grace differ from approaching a divine courtroom in fear?
- What comfort comes from knowing Jesus continues to advocate for us?

A helpful summary:

We do not approach an impersonal heavenly system. We approach God through the living Christ who knows human life from within.

A living priest and a completed sacrifice

Read Hebrews 7:23–28.

Ask:

- What is finished and never repeated?
- What continues?
- Why must Jesus be alive to intercede?
- How is ongoing priestly ministry different from repeated sacrifice?
- What does “he always lives to intercede” communicate about his present relationship with us?

The facilitator may clarify:

Jesus’ self-offering is once for all. His living presence, advocacy, and priestly mediation continue. “Ongoing” refers to the life and ministry of the risen Christ, not to another crucifixion.

Why the Ascension belongs to atonement

Read or summarize Hebrews 9:11–14.

Ask:

- What movement does Hebrews describe?
- Why does the priest enter the holy place?
- What does Moffitt’s interpretation add to the cross and resurrection?
- What is lost when atonement ends conceptually at Jesus’ death?
- How do resurrection and Ascension turn a dead victim into a living priest?
- How does this enlarge atonement beyond a legal transaction?

A simple summary is enough:

In Hebrews, Jesus dies, rises, enters God’s presence, and ministers there as the living High Priest. His death cannot be separated from his resurrected and ascended life.

The facilitator does not need to insist that every participant adopt every detail of Moffitt’s reconstruction. The important insight is that Hebrews treats the risen and ascended Jesus as essential to salvation.

Blood as life given and restored

Ask:

- How have you usually understood the biblical image of blood?
- What changes when blood signifies life as well as death?
- Why does the chapter emphasize that Jesus presents his living, resurrected life?
- How does this shift the emphasis from punishment toward life, access, and communion?
- What does the living Christ offer that a completed event in the past alone could not?

This section should remain brief. The facilitator can say:

The point is not to imagine heavenly biology literally, but to recognize that Jesus' offering is inseparable from his living, embodied person.

Humanity carried into God's presence

Read aloud: "The Son doesn't shed his humanity at the door of heaven."

Ask:

- Why is Jesus' continuing humanity important?
- What does it mean that one of us is present in the life of God?
- How does this affect the way we understand our bodies?
- What hope does it offer for weakness, aging, disability, grief, or suffering?
- How does it change prayer to approach a Christ who remains truly human?
- What does the Ascension say about God's commitment to creation?

Read Philippians 3:20–21.

Ask:

What does embodied transformation suggest about the future God intends?

Access and belonging

Read Ephesians 2:4–7.

Ask:

- What does it mean that believers are raised and seated with Christ?
- Is this only future, or is it also a present spiritual reality?
- How does this language affect belonging?
- What changes if we are not striving to reach God but learning to live from access already given?
- How might assurance replace anxiety?

Read aloud: “We are not striving toward union; we are learning to live from it.”

Ask:

Where do you still live as though belonging must be achieved?

Atonement reveals love rather than creating it

Read: “Atonement does not allow God to love us; it reveals the love that has always been.”

Ask:

- How is that different from the idea that Jesus changes the Father’s disposition toward us?
- What image of the Father does the Ascension reveal?
- How do Father, Son, and Spirit remain united in Christ’s offering and intercession?
- How might this heal shame or fear?
- What does it mean to approach God from within love rather than trying to secure love?

Baptism and ascended life

Ask:

- How does the Ascension enlarge Romans 6?
- What might it mean that baptism joins us not only to Christ’s death and resurrection, but to his continuing life?
- How does baptism become an entrance into a story Christ still lives?
- What does it mean to live from where Christ already is?
- How might baptismal identity shape daily formation?

A helpful clarification:

The chapter is not adding a new ritual step. It is enlarging the reality into which baptism joins us.

Formation from the living Christ

Ask:

- What is the difference between imitating a historical Jesus and participating in the living Christ?
- How does the Spirit make the ascended Christ present within us?
- What changes when formation flows from union instead of distance?
- How might this reshape sin, obedience, or spiritual effort?
- What does Christ’s continuing intercession mean on a day when you feel you have failed?

A shared priesthood

Read 1 Peter 2:4–5.

Ask:

- How does Christ's priesthood shape the life of the church?
- What does it mean for believers to become a holy priesthood?
- What kinds of "spiritual sacrifices" might we offer?
- How does shared priesthood challenge passive or highly ranked understandings of church?
- How might every believer participate in God's reconciling work?

Ascension, unity, and shared glory

Ask:

- Why does the chapter connect Ascension with unity?
- How can believers remain divided if they share the same life in Christ?
- What is the difference between unity based on enforced agreement and unity based on participation?
- How does shared belonging change the way we view other Christians?
- What might it mean for humanity to share Christ's glory without grasping for status?

The facilitator can allow this to prepare the group for Part Two without attempting the full unity discussion yet.

New creation rather than escape

Read Matthew 6:9–10 or Philippians 3:20–21.

Ask:

- What is the Christian hope according to this chapter?
- Is the goal leaving earth or the reunion of heaven and earth?
- How does Jesus' embodied Ascension point toward renewed creation?
- What difference does embodied hope make for the way we treat bodies, creation, work, justice, and suffering now?
- What does it mean that Jesus is the firstfruits of a world made new?

A concise summary:

Jesus does not abandon creation. In his risen humanity, creation's future has already entered God's presence.

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose only those most helpful.

Understanding

- Why is Jesus' living priesthood important?
- What is finished, and what continues?
- Why does the Ascension belong to atonement?
- Why does Jesus' continuing humanity matter?
- What does it mean that humanity is present in God's life?
- How does Ascension point toward new creation?

Personal reflection

- Did you previously imagine Jesus as embodied now?
- What difference does a sympathetic, living High Priest make to you?
- Where are you striving for access or belonging that Christ has already opened?
- How does embodied hope speak to your own limitations or grief?
- What accusation do you need to bring before Christ's continuing intercession?
- What part of the Ascension brings you the most hope?

Formation

- What would it mean to live from union rather than strive toward it?
- How might prayer change if the living Christ carries your humanity into God's presence?
- How could assurance reshape obedience?
- How might shared priesthood affect your participation in church?
- What does Ascension invite you to value about embodied life?
- How might shared life with Christ become a source of unity?

Reflective practice

Invite participants to sit quietly and imagine approaching the throne of grace—not as outsiders seeking admission, but through the living Christ who has already gone before them.

Facilitator may pray slowly:

*Jesus, living and sympathetic High Priest,
you know human weakness from within.*

Pause.

You have carried our humanity into the presence of God.

Pause.

Where I feel accused, remind me that you intercede.

Pause.

Where I strive for belonging, teach me to live from the place you have already opened.

Pause.

Where I feel limited by my body, suffering, or mortality, root me in the hope of resurrection and new creation.

Allow several minutes of silence.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where do you still imagine Christ as distant, absent, or only part of the past?

Receive

The risen and embodied Jesus lives in God's presence as your sympathetic High Priest, carrying your humanity, wounds, prayers, and future with him.

Practice

When you pray this week, begin with: Jesus, you have gone before me, and I come with you to the throne of grace.

Share

Remind someone who feels ashamed, excluded, or accused that Christ's presence opens mercy, access, and belonging.

Closing question

What changes when you realize that Jesus has not left humanity behind, but has carried humanity into the heart of God?

Closing prayer

*Living Christ,
you entered our humanity,
carried it through death,
raised it into life,
and brought it into the presence of God.*

*Teach us to approach with confidence,
not because we are strong,
but because you are our sympathetic High Priest.*

*Free us from striving toward a belonging
you have already opened.
Form us in your ascended life,
and make us signs of the new creation still to come.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ Keep the larger message in view. Hebrews is complex, but the group does not need to master every sacrificial detail.
- ✓ Do not imply that Jesus' cross was insufficient. His sacrifice is once for all; resurrection and Ascension belong to the complete saving movement of Christ.
- ✓ Use "ongoing atonement" carefully. It refers to the continuing ministry of the living High Priest, not repeated suffering or repeated sacrifice.
- ✓ Allow room for questions about embodiment without becoming speculative about the physical conditions of heaven.
- ✓ Keep new creation embodied. The chapter's hope is not escape from material existence but its transformation.
- ✓ Let unity emerge as a consequence of shared life, while saving the fuller discussion for Chapter 8.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement:
Jesus does not ascend away from humanity. He carries humanity into glory, opens access to divine communion, and forms us from the living relationship we already share with him.

Chapter 8: Unity, Love, and the Shared Life

Session Eleven : Shared glory and the source of unity **Session Twelve**: From fences to bridges

The facilitator should not try to cover every image, quotation, or theological definition. The first session establishes where unity comes from. The second gives participants room to examine how they actually live with difference.

Session Eleven: Shared Glory and the Source of Unity

Session Eleven purpose

This session helps participants understand unity as participation in the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit rather than as agreement, sameness, or human achievement. Through Emmaus, John 14, and John 17, participants explore the Spirit's indwelling presence and the glory Jesus shares so that his followers may become one.

Central truth

Christian unity is not something perfect people accomplish by agreeing. It is the gift of God's shared life, given through the Spirit to imperfect people.

Key movement

This session moves from: *unity as agreement and uniformity to unity as participation in the love, glory, and communion of Father, Son, and Spirit.*

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read through the section ending with "The Garden of Fences."
- Read John 17 slowly, preferably more than once.
- Choose a portion of John 17 rather than feeling obligated to analyze every verse.
- Be ready to distinguish participation in God from absorption into God.
- Avoid making *perichoresis* the center of the session; it is useful language serving a relational truth.
- Allow the Emmaus story to provide a warm, accessible entry into the theological material.
- Remember that unity is a gift to receive before it becomes a practice to pursue.

Suggested Scriptures

- Luke 24:13–35
- John 14:15–23
- John 16:12–15
- John 17:3–23
- Ephesians 4:1–6
- 2 Peter 1:3–4

A shorter session could focus on Luke 24, John 17:20–23, and Ephesians 4.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and response to Part Two — 10 minutes
- Emmaus and presence — 15 minutes
- The Spirit and mutual indwelling — 20 minutes
- John 17 and shared glory — 30 minutes

- Closing reflection and prayer — 10 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask: What word or image from the chapter stayed with you most strongly?

Then:

- What did the transition from foundation to participation suggest to you?
- How have you usually defined Christian unity?
- Have you thought of unity primarily as agreement, closeness, organizational connection, or something else?
- What felt new in the chapter's description of unity?

A helpful framing statement:

Before asking what we should do to create unity, the chapter asks where unity comes from.

Emmaus as a formation story

Read Luke 24:13–35.

Ask:

- Where are the disciples emotionally and spiritually as the story begins?
- How does Jesus approach them?
- Why might presence come before recognition?
- What role do Scripture, hospitality, conversation, and shared bread play?
- How does their invitation, “Stay with us,” become a kind of “Here I am”?
- What changes once their story is reframed in the presence of Christ?

Read aloud:

“Christ meets them with presence rather than proof, inviting trust before recognition.”

Ask: How might this shape the way we accompany people who are confused, grieving, or questioning?

The story of shared life

Ask:

- How does the chapter trace shared life from creation through covenant and into Christ?

- What does it mean that unity is grounded in divine faithfulness rather than human performance?
- How does God continue moving toward humanity after trust is fractured?
- What difference does it make to see Scripture as one unfolding story of God's pursuit rather than mainly as commands and moral lessons?
- Where do you recognize God's "Here I AM" in your own story?

John 14 and indwelling presence

Read John 14:15–23.

Ask:

- What language of mutual presence appears?
- What does Jesus promise about the Spirit?
- What does "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" suggest?
- How is this more than receiving help from a distant God?
- What changes when the Spirit is understood as shared divine life dwelling within us?
- Why does Jesus say, "I will not leave you as orphans"?

A helpful summary:

Through Jesus, humanity is brought into God's life; through the Spirit, God's life is brought into us.

***Perichoresis* and participation**

The facilitator may briefly describe *perichoresis* as mutual indwelling in which distinction remains without separation.

Ask:

- What does mutual indwelling help us understand about Father, Son, and Spirit?
- How can persons remain distinct while sharing one life?
- Why does participation in God not erase our personhood?
- How might communion fulfill rather than diminish individuality?
- What implications might this have for unity amid difference?

There is no need for a lengthy technical discussion.

The Spirit's work

Invite participants to consider the chapter's descriptions of the Spirit: restoring belovedness, cultivating awareness, producing fruit, healing wounds, guiding through Scripture and community, and empowering unity.

Ask:

- Which work of the Spirit do you most recognize or need?
- Why can unity not be produced merely by human effort?
- How does the fruit of the Spirit create conditions for unity?
- What might “subterranean” formation look like?
- How do Scripture, inward witness, and community work together in discernment?
- Where might the Spirit be speaking quietly rather than dramatically?

John 17 and shared glory

Read John 17:20–23, perhaps preceded by verses 3–5.

Ask:

- What is Jesus asking the Father to give his followers?
- What is the source or pattern of their unity?
- What does Jesus say he has already given them?
- What relationship exists among glory, love, unity, and witness?
- How is unity connected to the world believing?
- Why is this more than organizational cooperation?

Read aloud: “Unity is not the achievement of perfect people finally agreeing with one another. It is the gift of a perfect God shared with imperfect people.”

Then ask: What relief or challenge do you hear in that statement?

What is glory?

Ask:

- How have you usually understood *glory*?
- What does the chapter add through the ideas of weight, presence, dignity, self-giving love, and shared life?
- How is glory revealed in Jesus' mission and cross?
- What does it mean that glory is shared rather than hoarded?
- How might glory become distorted into status, superiority, or the need to be right?

- What kind of glory makes unity possible?

A concise summary:

In John, glory is God's life and character made visible in Jesus and shared with believers through the Spirit.

The garden of fences

Read the parable aloud.

Ask:

- What do the garden and fences represent?
- Why do fences initially seem reasonable?
- What is lost as the fences rise?
- What does the gardener's question reveal?
- Where have Christian communities guarded their own plots at the expense of the common garden?
- What would shared tending and shared harvest look like?

Do not move too deeply into participants' personal fences yet; that belongs primarily to the next session.

Core discussion questions for Session One

Understanding

- Why does unity begin in the Trinity?
- What does Emmaus teach about presence and formation?
- How does the Spirit make shared life possible?
- What does mutual indwelling mean without erasing distinction?
- What is the relationship among glory, love, unity, and mission?
- Why is unity a gift before it is an achievement?

Personal reflection

- Where have you experienced Christ drawing near before you recognized him?
- Do you experience the Spirit as indwelling presence?
- What part of John 17 feels most astonishing?
- Is unity hopeful, unrealistic, threatening, or deeply desired for you?
- Where do you long to experience shared life rather than isolation?
- What does receiving shared glory awaken in you?

Formation

- How might presence reshape the way you respond to disagreement?
- What fruit of the Spirit is especially needed for unity?
- Where are you striving to manufacture something only the Spirit can form?
- How might shared glory free you from grasping for recognition?
- What practice could make you more attentive to Christ on the road?
- How can this group become a place of participation rather than mere discussion?

Spiritual practice

Invite participants to sit quietly with John 17:22–23.

The facilitator may pray slowly: *Jesus, you have given us the glory given to you.*

Pause.

Draw us into the love you share with the Father.

Pause.

Spirit of God, make that shared life real within us.

Pause.

Where we grasp for certainty, status, or separation, teach us to receive.

Pause.

Form in us the unity for which Jesus prayed.

Allow several moments of silence.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where have you understood unity mainly as agreement or sameness?

Receive

Unity begins as the shared life and glory of God given to us through the Spirit.

Practice

Read John 17:20–23 once each day and notice one word or phrase that draws your attention.

Share

Offer someone the gift of attentive presence before offering explanation or correction.

Closing question

What changes when unity is understood not as something we manufacture, but as a life in which we participate?

Session Twelve: From fences to bridges**Session Twelve purpose**

This session helps participants examine the visible and invisible fences they construct around traditions, interpretations, relationships, and identities. It invites them to surrender misplaced glory, recognize the Spirit’s work beyond familiar boundaries, and participate in unity by rearranging fences into bridges.

Central truth

Unity does not require the erasure of difference. It requires hearts formed by the Spirit to receive and share Christ’s self-giving love across the lines that divide us.

Key movement

This session moves from: *certainty, tribalism, comparison, and fence building* to *humility, curiosity, shared honor, and bridge building*.

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read from “Misplaced Glory” through the end of the chapter.
- Reflect honestly on a fence the Spirit has revealed personally.
- Avoid turning the discussion into criticism of denominations or groups not present.
- Be prepared to distinguish healthy boundaries from divisive fences.
- Keep political and theological differences connected to the deeper postures of fear, pride, and control.
- Allow the poem “Bridges” and the chapter’s closing image to carry the spiritual practice.
- Model humility by naming personal learning rather than positioning oneself above others.

Suggested Scriptures

- John 13:34–35
- John 17:20–23
- Ephesians 4:1–6
- Philippians 2:1–5
- Romans 14:1–13
- 1 Corinthians 12:12–27
- Colossians 3:12–15

A shorter session could use John 13, Ephesians 4, and Romans 14.

Suggested session flow:

- Reconnection and reflection — 10 minutes
- Misplaced glory and personal fences — 20 minutes
- Grapes, jelly, and peanut butter — 15 minutes
- Turning fences into bridges — 25 minutes
- The witness of unity — 10 minutes
- Poem and prayerful response — 10 minutes

Reconnecting with Session Eleven

Ask:

- What stayed with you from John 17?
- Did you notice the difference between unity as gift and unity as achievement?
- Where did you see the Spirit’s work during the week?
- Did the image of the garden reveal any fences you had not noticed?

Misplaced glory

Read the personal story about the author and her sisters.

Ask:

- What makes this story meaningful?
- How can love remain while hidden superiority creates distance?
- What does it mean to grasp for “the glory of my fence”?
- Why might being part of the “right church” become spiritually attractive?
- What changed when shared glory replaced comparative glory?
- Have you ever realized that the other person had not changed, but your posture had?

The facilitator should not pressure participants to confess publicly. Honest internal recognition is valuable.

The fences we do not know we have

Review the chapter's list:

- fear of drifting,
- uniformity equated with faithfulness,
- suspicion of Christians who differ,
- tribal trust,
- judgment mistaken for biblical conviction,
- hidden spiritual pride.

Ask:

- Which posture is most recognizable?
- Why do these fences often feel like protection of truth?
- How can fear disguise itself as faithfulness?
- When does conviction become superiority?
- What is the difference between discernment and suspicion?
- How might a fence prevent us from recognizing the Spirit's work?

Grapes, grape jelly, and peanut butter

Ask:

- What does this image help you see?
- What are the shared roots among the different grapes?
- What might the grape jelly represent?
- Who has been "peanut butter" for you—someone outside your tradition who nourished your faith?
- How can traditions remain distinct without treating one another as enemies?
- Where does the analogy break down?

The facilitator can keep this light while allowing it to open serious reflection.

Healthy identity without tribalism

Ask:

- Is it possible to value your tradition deeply without placing it at the center of God's kingdom?
- What gifts has your tradition contributed?
- What limitations might it carry?
- What have you received from Christians outside your stream?
- How can gratitude replace defensiveness?

- What core convictions allow generous engagement without erasing theological difference?

Ephesians 4:4–6 may provide a shared center.

From fences to bridges

Read aloud: “The wood of a fence can be rearranged. It can become a bridge.”

Ask:

- What is the difference between tearing down every boundary and rearranging a divisive fence into a bridge?
- What materials from an old division might become resources for understanding?
- What practices help people cross toward one another?
- How do listening, story sharing, curiosity, and repentance create bridges?
- Where is the Spirit inviting you to walk toward someone rather than wait for them to change?
- What might bridge building cost in comfort, certainty, reputation, or pride?

Unity is not uniformity

Ask:

- Why do churches often confuse unity with sameness?
- What kinds of differences can healthy unity hold?
- What convictions must remain central?
- How can people disagree without fence building?
- What does it mean to honor Christ above every dividing line?
- How can diversity become a witness to the Spirit rather than a threat?

A helpful clarification:

Unity does not require pretending all beliefs are identical or all disagreements are unimportant. It requires that difference no longer cancels love, dignity, listening, or shared belonging in Christ.

When disagreement becomes life-giving

Read Romans 14:1–13 or Philippians 2:1–5.

Ask:

- What postures allow disagreement without contempt?
- What role does humility play?

- How do we avoid judging another servant of Christ?
- What does it mean to consider another person's interests?
- When is a difficult conversation an act of love?
- How can truth be held without being wielded as a weapon?

Unity as witness

Read John 13:34–35 and John 17:21.

Ask:

- What does Jesus say will identify his disciples?
- How is the credibility of the gospel connected to Christian relationships?
- What message do divided Christians communicate?
- Why might love across real difference be more compelling than agreement within sameness?
- Where could the church offer a different witness in a polarized climate?
- What would one visible act of unity look like?

Glory shared rather than hoarded

Ask:

- What happens when glory becomes about being right, winning, controlling, or shining brighter?
- How does Jesus reveal glory through self-giving?
- What does it mean to yield ourselves like grapes being pressed into one cup?
- How can shared glory create room for another person's gift?
- What would it look like to celebrate grace in a tradition other than your own?
- How does the Spirit redirect self-glorification toward shared life?

The sacred middle space

Read the poem "Bridges" aloud, slowly.

Ask:

- Which line most speaks to you?
- What makes the middle space sacred?
- Why does standing between stories require courage?
- What is the difference between being a bridge builder and avoiding conviction?
- Where have precious truths been used as weapons?
- Who has been named enemy rather than neighbor or image bearer?

- Where might Jesus be standing with open arms between divided people?

Core discussion questions for Session Twelve

Understanding

- What is misplaced glory?
- Why do sincere people build fences?
- How can unity include genuine difference?
- What does the Spirit do that argument alone cannot?
- How is bridge building different from abandoning truth?
- Why is unity essential to Christian witness?

Personal reflection

- What fence have you discovered in your own heart?
- Who has been difficult for you to recognize as a fellow Christian?
- Where has fear of drifting shaped your posture?
- Whose faith has enriched you from outside your tradition?
- When have you cared more about being right than staying relational?
- What story might you need to hear from the other side of a divide?

Formation

- What would humility look like in a current disagreement?
- Where might curiosity replace suspicion?
- What fence material could be rearranged into a bridge?
- What act of shared honor could you offer?
- How can you speak truth without using it as a weapon?
- What one step can you take toward Jesus' prayer for unity?

Spiritual practice

Invite participants to sit quietly after hearing the poem.

The facilitator may say: *Picture one fence—personal, theological, relational, or communal. Do not try to tear everything down. Ask the Spirit what one piece of that fence could become part of a bridge.*

Pause between each question:

What fear helped build this fence?

What person or group stands on the other side?

What story have I not heard?

What comfort, certainty, or pride might bridge building cost me?

What is one step love is asking me to take?

Allow a minute or two of silence.

Participants may share one word or possible step, but sharing should remain optional.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

What fence of certainty, fear, tribal identity, or judgment is the Spirit revealing?

Receive

The glory Jesus shares is not the glory of being right or superior, but the self-giving love that makes unity possible.

Practice

Listen this week to one person or teacher from beyond your usual circle with humility and discernment rather than immediate suspicion.

Share

Take one concrete bridge-building step: begin a conversation, offer appreciation, acknowledge harm, invite someone to a table, or listen to a story you have not heard.

Closing question

What is one fence the Spirit may be inviting you to rearrange into a bridge?

Closing prayer

*Father, Son, and Spirit,
you live in perfect shared love
and have invited us into your life.*

*Show us the fences built from fear,
certainty, pride, and the need to be right.
Teach us to hold truth without using it as a weapon
and to honor Christ above every dividing line.*

*Rearrange what has separated us.
Make us builders rather than breakers,
healers rather than dividers,
willing to stand in the sacred middle space
with arms open like Jesus.*

*Form in us the unity for which he prayed,
one conversation, one table,
and one act of love at a time.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes for both sessions:

- ✓ Do not reduce unity to niceness. Jesus' prayer concerns shared life, visible love, and credible witness.
- ✓ Do not define unity as agreement on every issue. The chapter specifically distinguishes unity from uniformity.
- ✓ Do not imply that all boundaries are wrong. Healthy boundaries may protect truth, safety, and vulnerable people. The concern is with barriers built from superiority, fear, exclusion, and refusal to love.
- ✓ Keep personal reflection ahead of criticism of institutions. The most fruitful question is not "Who builds fences?" but "Where have I built one?"
- ✓ Avoid allowing current politics to consume the discussion. The implications are important, but the session should remain centered on the posture and witness of Christ.
- ✓ Honor conviction. Bridge building does not require pretending differences do not matter. It requires humility, listening, shared dignity, and refusal to dehumanize.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement:
- ✓ Unity comes from participating in the shared glory of Father, Son, and Spirit. As that life forms us, the fences of fear and superiority can be rearranged into bridges of love.

Chapter 9: A Community Shaped by Father, Son, and Spirit

By this point, the group itself has become part of the lesson. They are no longer only discussing community; they have been practicing attention, vulnerability, listening, prayer, and shared life together for several weeks. The mugs give the facilitator a playful structure without losing the chapter's depth.

Recommended pacing

One session of approximately 75–90 minutes.

Rather than discussing every mug in equal depth, the facilitator can invite participants to choose the image that most speaks to their present place in community. This will keep the gathering relational and prevent it from feeling like another long teaching session.

Session Thirteen: A Community Shaped by Father, Son, and Spirit

Session purpose

This session helps participants recognize Christian community as an embodied expression of the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit. Through the playful images of the mug cupboard, participants reflect on gratitude, consistency, hospitality, diversity, love, growth, and mission—and consider what they are already learning through the community that has formed within the group.

Central truth

Community shaped by Father, Son, and Spirit is sustained not merely by activity or agreement, but by delight, embodied presence, mutual care, and shared participation in God's life.

Key movement

This session moves from: *attending church or evaluating community to receiving, contributing to, and carrying shared life together*. It also moves from: *community as obligation to community as delight, belonging, and participation*

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read the chapter and choose two or three mugs to highlight if time becomes limited.
- Consider bringing several different mugs and placing them in the center of the group.
- Invite participants, if practical, to bring a favorite or meaningful mug of their own.
- Reflect on how the group itself has changed since the study began.
- Be prepared to celebrate what has formed among them rather than focusing mainly on what is lacking.
- Keep the session playful, but do not let the images become disconnected from the deeper themes of Trinity, atonement, and shared life.
- Allow the reflection questions from the chapter to carry most of the application.

Suggested Scriptures

- John 17:20–23
- Acts 2:42–47
- Ephesians 2:19–22
- Romans 12:9–13
- 1 Corinthians 12:12–27
- 1 Timothy 1:5

A shorter session could use Ephesians 2:19–22 and Romans 12:9–13.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and noticing the community that has formed — 10 minutes
- Community as delight and embodied presence — 15 minutes
- The mug cupboard — 35 minutes
- Choosing a mug and personal reflection — 15 minutes
- A “mug to go” response and closing prayer — 10 minutes

Begin by asking:

As we have met together over these weeks, what have you come to appreciate about this group?

Then:

- When have you felt seen, heard, encouraged, or surprised?
- What has helped the group become more than people discussing a book?
- Where have you noticed trust, honesty, patience, or shared joy growing?
- How has being together affected the way you received the material?

This opening allows the group’s actual experience to become part of the chapter.

The facilitator might say: We have spent several weeks talking about participation in shared life. Tonight, we can notice that we have also been practicing it.

Read aloud: “Community formed in the image of the Trinity is not sustained primarily by activity or agreement, but by delight.”

Ask:

- What is the difference between loving someone and delighting in their presence?
- What communicates, “I am glad you are here”?
- How do facial expression, tone, posture, and attention shape a gathering?
- What makes community feel like responsibility rather than gift?
- Where have you experienced the delight of being welcomed as you are?

The facilitator could invite participants to look around the circle briefly and silently acknowledge the gift of the people present.

Read Ephesians 2:19–22.

Ask:

- What do you notice about the repeated communal language?
- What does it mean that we are being “built together”?
- How is the community a dwelling place of the Spirit?
- Why is the temple “not a one-person gig”?
- What does each person contribute simply by being present?

Read aloud: “Christian community does not create God’s shared life; it is where we learn to savor it together.”

Then ask: How have you learned to savor God’s life through another person?

If mugs have been brought, place them in the center. The facilitator can briefly introduce the cupboard as a picture of community: different shapes, sizes, ages, stories, and purposes, but all able to receive and carry something life-giving.

The facilitator need not work through every mug in detail. One option is to read the brief descriptions and let participants choose which one they want to discuss.

Gratitude

Ask:

- How does gratitude change the atmosphere of a community?
- What happens when people feel appreciated rather than evaluated?
- What gift or quality in someone in this group are you grateful for?
- How can gratitude make a community more resilient?

An especially meaningful practice would be to invite each person to name something they appreciate about the group as a whole, rather than placing anyone under pressure to praise a particular individual.

Consistency

Ask:

- Why are relationships formed through repeated presence rather than occasional intensity?
- What has consistent gathering made possible for this group?
- How does reliability help heal distrust?

- What is the difference between attending and being devoted to one another?
- What small act of consistency strengthens community most?

Hospitality

Ask:

- What makes someone feel there is room for them at the table?
- How does face-to-face presence differ from texts or social media interaction?
- Who is usually easy to welcome?
- Who might be unintentionally overlooked?
- What could an “extra chair” look like in this group or church?

The idea of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing the table can be kept light:

We do not have to create God’s presence at the table. We become aware that God is already there with us.

Diversity

Using the “Travel is fatal to prejudice” mug, ask:

- How has knowing people different from us changed our assumptions?
- What kinds of diversity strengthen Christian community?
- How do we make sure difference is not merely tolerated but valued?
- Whose voice is most easily left at the edge?
- What does it mean for every part of the body to be needed?

Intergenerational belonging

Using the princess mug, ask:

- What do children and younger believers need to experience in Christian community?
- What can older and younger people learn from one another?
- How can we make room for immaturity without shaming it?
- What memories do we hope younger people will carry from being among us?
- How might joy itself be a spiritual gift to the community?

Love

Read 1 Timothy 1:5.

Ask:

- What happens when love becomes the stated goal of instruction, doctrine, and community?
- How can we tell whether our teaching is actually producing love?

- What is the difference between manufactured friendliness and love flowing from union with God?
- Where has someone's Christlike love formed you more deeply than their words?
- How can truth and love remain inseparable?

Read aloud: "Love must be the basis for our relationships and the springboard for everything else."

Growth

Using the planted mug, ask:

- What is ours to do in another person's growth?
- What belongs only to God?
- How can communities become controlling when they try to make people grow?
- Why is slowness not necessarily failure?
- What light and living water help people flourish?
- Where might we need to "love powerfully, live purposefully, and leave the rest to God"?

This may be especially helpful after earlier chapters addressing performance.

Mugs to go

Tell the drive-through story briefly or invite participants to recall it from the chapter.

Ask:

- What changed when the mug lessons moved from the cupboard into an irritating moment?
- How does community prepare us to respond differently in ordinary life?
- Why is shared life never meant to remain inside the group?
- In what seasons do we pour, receive, or do both?
- What might a small "mug to go" look like this week?

This section brings mission into everyday kindness rather than making it feel like another program.

Rather than using a long list of discussion questions, I would invite each participant to choose one mug:

- ❖ gratitude,
- ❖ consistency,
- ❖ hospitality,

- ❖ diversity,
- ❖ intergenerational joy,
- ❖ love,
- ❖ growth,
- ❖ or going.

Then ask:

Which mug feels closest to your present posture in community, and what might the Spirit be inviting you to notice?

Possible follow-up questions:

- ❖ Is this something you are receiving or something you are being invited to offer?
- ❖ What has helped this quality grow in you?
- ❖ What makes it difficult?
- ❖ What is one simple way you could embody it?

Because the group has been together for weeks, another meaningful question would be:

- ❖ Which of these qualities have you already experienced in this group?

That keeps the session celebratory rather than primarily corrective.

The facilitator can select from these broader questions if further discussion is needed:

- What makes a gathering feel like shared life rather than an event?
- How does delight change the way people experience belonging?
- What does a community shaped by atonement do with weakness and failure?
- How can advocacy replace judgment?
- How do gratitude and consistency build trust?
- Why are hospitality and diversity necessary to the body of Christ?
- What is the difference between helping growth and trying to control it?
- How does community become a vessel of mission?

For personal reflection:

- What kind of presence do I currently offer—hurried or attentive, guarded or open?
- Do I tend to stand back and evaluate, or enter and participate?
- Where do I most need to recover delight?
- What do I need to receive from community?
- What am I able to offer?
- Which person or group might need an invitation to the table?

For formation:

- What practice would help me become more attentive?
- Where is consistency needed?
- Whose difference might enrich me?
- Where can I offer encouragement instead of evaluation?
- What growth do I need to entrust to God?
- What act of kindness could carry shared glory beyond this gathering?

Spiritual Practice

For the spiritual practice, give each participant a mug, or invite them to hold the one they brought.

The facilitator may say:

Notice the mug in your hands. It has a shape, a history, perhaps a chip or imperfection, and a capacity to receive and carry something. Let it remind you that community does not depend on identical containers. What matters is the shared life we receive and offer.

Pause.

Thank God for one person or gift within this group.

Pause.

Ask what quality the Spirit is inviting you to receive more fully: gratitude, consistency, hospitality, love, growth, or generosity.

Pause.

Ask what you are being invited to carry beyond this room.

Allow a few moments of silence.

Participants might then complete one of these sentences:

“In this community, I have received...” or

“My mug to go this week will be...”

Keep sharing brief and voluntary.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

What kind of presence have you been offering within community?

Receive

You belong within a community being built together as a dwelling place for the Spirit. You do not need to earn your place in the cupboard.

Practice

Choose one mug-quality—gratitude, consistency, hospitality, love, growth, or going—and embody it intentionally this week.

Share

Offer one simple “mug to go”: an invitation, encouragement, listening presence, generous act, or unexpected kindness.

The closing question could be:

What have you received from this group that you now want to carry into the world?

The facilitator might close:

*Father, Son, and Spirit,
thank you for inviting us into your shared life
and for giving us one another.*

*Teach us to delight in each other's presence,
to show up consistently,
to make room at the table,
and to honor the gifts and differences among us.*

*Let love remain our goal.
Help us plant and water faithfully
while trusting you to bring growth.*

*Fill our cups with gratitude and grace,
and send us into the world
ready to share what we have received.
Amen.*

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ Let the group enjoy this session. Laughter and playfulness are not distractions from formation; they can express the delight at the center of divine community.
- ✓ Celebrate what has already formed. The group has become a lived example of the chapter's message.
- ✓ Do not require every participant to disclose deeply. This session can be meaningful through appreciation, storytelling, and simple reflection.
- ✓ Avoid idealizing community. Shared life includes disappointment, repair, patience, and forgiveness as well as delight.
- ✓ Do not cover every mug unless the conversation naturally allows it. The images are invitations, not a checklist.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement: Community shaped by Father, Son, and Spirit becomes a place where people are delighted in, attended to, formed in love, and sent to carry shared life beyond the cupboard.

Chapter 10: Missional Participation in the Shared Life

Session Fourteen: Missional Participation in the Shared Life

Session purpose

This session helps participants reconsider mission, not primarily as activity, productivity, or measurable success, but as participation in the mission already flowing from Father, Son, and Spirit. It invites them to see that calling begins with presence, arises from belonging, and naturally overflows into hospitality, reconciliation, and love for the world.

Central truth

Mission is not something we manufacture for God. It is shared life with God overflowing into the world.

Key movement

This session moves from: *pressure, urgency, and working for God* to *presence, belonging, and participating with God*

Participants are invited to ask not only, “What should I do for God?” but also, “Where is God already at work, and how am I being invited to join?”

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read Chapter 10 and identify one section that speaks most personally to their own experience of calling.

- Reflect on whether mission has sometimes felt like joy, pressure, obligation, achievement, or belonging.
- Choose only a few Scriptures. The chapter contains many, and the gathering should not become a survey of every passage.
- Be sensitive to participants who have experienced ministry exhaustion, spiritual pressure, disappointment, changing seasons, grief, disability, retirement, or uncertainty about their calling.
- Avoid creating another assignment about mission. The chapter explicitly moves away from anxious performance.
- Prepare to lead a practice of listening and availability.

Suggested Scriptures

A strong selection would be:

Micah 6:6–8

Luke 4:16–21

Galatians 1:15–17

2 Corinthians 5:14–20

Matthew 28:18–20

A shorter session could focus on Micah 6, Galatians 1, and Matthew 28.

Suggested session flow:

- Welcome and reconnection — 10 minutes
- Mission: transaction or participation? — 15 minutes
- Jesus' mission and the posture of listening — 20 minutes
- Calling, identity, and Paul's first missionary journey — 20 minutes
- Hospitality and ordinary participation — 15 minutes
- Spiritual practice and closing — 10 minutes

Opening reflection

Ask:

- What does the word *mission* bring to mind?
- Does it evoke excitement, pressure, activity, evangelism, service, sacrifice, responsibility, or something else?
- When have you experienced mission as life-giving?
- When has it felt burdensome or driven by expectations?

Facilitator note:

- ✓ Do not begin by defining mission correctly. Let participants notice the emotional and spiritual associations they already carry.
- ✓ The chapter begins by acknowledging that preaching, teaching, healing, and care for others are good and necessary. Its concern is not activity itself, but activity disconnected from communion.

Mission as transaction or participation

Read Micah 6:6–8.

Ask:

- What do the people immediately assume God wants from them?
- Why do they respond by escalating the size of the sacrifice?
- What does this reveal about a transactional view of God?
- How does God redirect them?
- What is the difference between offering something to God and walking humbly with God?

Read aloud: “Mission, here, is not defined by sacrifice offered to God, but by life lived with God.”

Ask:

- Where might churches or individuals still approach mission transactionally?
- How can effectiveness, numbers, urgency, or visible success become substitutes for communion?
- Have you ever felt that God’s approval depended on how useful or productive you were?
- What changes when mission is understood as participation rather than repayment?

Facilitator clarification:

The chapter is not dismissing effort, planning, measurable fruit, or sacrifice. It is asking what source gives rise to them.

The issue is not whether we act, but whether our action flows from shared life with God.

Jesus’ mission flows from presence

Read Luke 4:16–21.

Invite participants to notice:

the Spirit’s presence,
the Father’s sending,
Jesus’ anointing,

the people toward whom the mission moves,
and the kind of restoration announced.

Ask:

- What does Jesus' mission reveal about the heart of God?
- Who receives particular attention in this passage?
- How is mission more than communicating religious information?
- What does Jesus reveal about freedom, healing, justice, restoration, and divine favor?
- Why is it significant that Jesus' public ministry follows baptism, belovedness, and wilderness formation?

Read aloud: "Jesus' mission emerges from attentiveness, not urgency."

Ask:

- What is the difference between acting from urgency and acting from attentiveness?
- Why can waiting feel irresponsible when needs are great?
- How might formation clarify rather than delay mission?
- What may happen when people are activated before their identity is grounded in God?

Listening before acting

The chapter traces this pattern through Jesus, Paul, Anna, Moses, Elijah, Mary, Samuel, and others.

Rather than reviewing them all, invite participants to choose one figure who speaks to them.

Ask:

- Which biblical person most helps you understand calling as presence and availability?
- What do Jesus in the wilderness, Paul in Arabia, Anna in the temple, and the disciples waiting in Jerusalem have in common?
- Why might listening be part of mission rather than preparation before the "real" mission?
- What makes the posture "Here I am" different from "Here is what I plan to accomplish for you"?

A helpful summary: Calling often begins before clarity. God's presence is the foundation; action grows from attentiveness.

Paul's first missionary journey

Read Galatians 1:15–17.

Ask:

- What is surprising about Paul's response after his encounter with Christ?

- Why might we have expected him to go immediately to established leaders?
- What is the difference between Christ being revealed *to* Paul and Christ being revealed *in* Paul?
- What might Paul have needed to unlearn, receive, or allow the Spirit to form in him?
- How could Arabia be understood as his first missionary journey?

Read aloud: “If this pattern holds, then the question is not whether we are called, but whether we are willing to be formed.”

Allow silence.

Then ask:

- What part of your calling may require deeper formation rather than faster action?
- Where might you be tempted to imitate another person’s role instead of discerning the Spirit’s work in you?
- How can community help test and bless calling without defining it prematurely?

Working for God or working with God

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 1 Corinthians 15:10.

Ask:

- What does Paul mean by being a co-worker with God?
- How is working *with* God different from working *for* God as though everything depends on us?
- What burden is released when we recognize that God is already at work?
- How can grace produce hard work without turning into striving?
- What is the difference between working hard because of grace and working hard to be sure of grace?

This may be a deeply personal section. Invite participants to reflect on whether their service has ever become entangled with proving their worth.

Calling flows from identity

The chapter emphasizes that calling is not our identity; it flows from our identity as beloved children who belong to God.

Ask:

- What happens when usefulness becomes the basis of belonging?
- How can ministry, leadership, caregiving, parenting, achievement, or service become tangled with identity?
- What feelings arise when a role changes or ends?

- How might retirement, grief, illness, family responsibility, or a hidden season reshape calling without eliminating it?
- What difference does it make to believe God delights in us, not merely values what we accomplish?

Read aloud: “Calling is not meant to be our identity, but to flow from our identity as God’s beloved.”

Ask:

- Where have you been tempted to reverse that order?
- What might become freer if you no longer needed your calling to prove your worth?

Freed for vocation

The chapter connects atonement with restored vocation.

Ask:

- What does it mean to say that Jesus not only forgives sin but restores human purpose?
- How do fear, guilt, shame, and self-protection interfere with our capacity to reflect God’s love?
- What becomes possible when people know they are forgiven, welcomed, and delighted in?
- How does the phrase “When we live loved, we live loving” describe mission?
- What might mission look like when it flows from joy rather than anxiety?

A possible summary: Atonement frees us not only from guilt, but for participation—to reflect God’s love into the world and offer the world’s praise back to God.

The posture of “Here I am”

Invite participants to recall Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Mary, Philip, or Anna.

Ask:

- What qualities do you see in their responses?
- How do listening, surrender, courage, availability, and trust belong together?
- Which is harder for you: availability without clarity, or action without control?
- What would “Here I am—with you, and for those you send me to” mean in your present season?

Read Matthew 28:18–20.

Ask:

- What words are often emphasized in this passage?

- What words may receive less attention?
- What difference does Jesus' promise, "I am with you always," make to the commission?
- How is mission Trinitarian in this passage?

Hospitality as mission overflowing

The chapter describes hospitality as the outward expression of inward encounter.

Ask:

- What examples of hospitality in the chapter stood out to you?
- How do presence, healing, welcome, reconciliation, listening, feeding, and forgiveness become expressions of mission?
- Where might shared life overflow naturally in your home, neighborhood, workplace, church, friendships, or family?
- What ordinary act of presence may be as missional as a visible ministry role?
- How can we become attentive to what God is already doing rather than trying to create something impressive?

Read aloud: "In homes, roads, tables, and communities, the presence we have received becomes presence we offer."

Ask:

- Where might you be invited to offer presence rather than solutions?
- Who might need welcome more than instruction?
- Where could reconciliation become an expression of shared mission?

The river and changing seasons

Invite participants to reflect on the river image.

Ask:

- What does the river teach about source, flow, and participation?
- How can calling change shape without losing its source?
- What may be happening beneath the surface during seasons that appear quiet, frozen, or unproductive?
- What season of the river best describes your life right now?
- Where are you being fed?
- Where are you being invited to empty into something larger than yourself?

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose only those most suited to the group.

Understanding

- How is mission different when Acts is understood as the continuing work of the Spirit rather than primarily human achievement?
- What does Micah 6 reveal about transactional religion?
- Why does calling begin with presence?
- What does Paul's time in Arabia teach about formation and mission?
- How does atonement restore human vocation?
- Why is hospitality a natural expression of shared life?

Personal reflection

- Has mission generally felt like participation, pressure, privilege, duty, or some combination?
- Where have you confused usefulness with worth?
- What role or responsibility has become too central to your identity?
- What season of calling are you currently experiencing?
- Where might God already be at work around you?
- What helps you listen before acting?

Formation

- What may need to be formed in you before it is expressed through you?
- Where are you being invited to move from striving to cooperation with the Spirit?
- What would it mean to receive calling rather than discover or manufacture it?
- How might your understanding of mission change if you trusted that it does not depend on you?
- What ordinary act of hospitality could flow naturally from God's presence in you?

Spiritual practice

The posture of "Here I am"

Invite participants to sit quietly with open hands.

The facilitator may say: *Mission begins not with our plans, but with the God who is already present and already at work.*

Pause between each line:

Father, I receive your delight before I offer you my work.

Jesus, teach me to live from the life you share with the Father.

Holy Spirit, quiet the urgency that keeps me from hearing you.

Where I have worked to prove my worth, return me to belovedness.

Where I have carried responsibility that belongs to you, teach me to release it.

Where I have waited for perfect clarity, give me courage to become available.

Here I am—with you, and for those you send me to.

Allow a minute or two of silence.

Then ask participants privately to notice:

Where is God already present?

What invitation, person, place, or ordinary act has come to mind?

No one should feel required to share.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where has mission become pressure, performance, or self-reliance?

Receive

You are called because God is present and because you are beloved—not because the mission depends upon your ability.

Practice

Set aside a brief period this week to listen before acting. Pray simply, “Here I am. Show me where you are already at work.”

Share

Offer one act of hospitality, reconciliation, attention, or care that flows naturally from presence rather than obligation.

Closing question

Where do you sense God inviting you to join what is already unfolding rather than asking you to make something happen?

Closing prayer

*Father, Son, and Spirit,
free us from the burden of believing that your mission depends upon us.*

*Root our calling in your presence
and our service in our belovedness.*

*Teach us to listen before acting,
to receive before giving,
and to join what you are already doing.*

*Where we have worked for approval,
let grace restore us.*

*Where we have confused activity with faithfulness,
draw us back into communion.*

*Let the life we receive from you
overflow in welcome, justice, mercy, reconciliation, and love.*

*Here we are—with you,
and for those to whom you send us.*

Amen.

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ Do not turn the session into another call to do more
- ✓ The chapter's invitation is not increased activity, but deeper participation. The session should leave participants more grounded, not more burdened.
- ✓ Honor changing seasons of calling
- ✓ Some participants may be grieving the loss of a role or wondering whether they still have a purpose. Emphasize that calling may change form without disappearing.
- ✓ Be careful with urgency: Real needs exist, and the chapter does not advocate passivity. It resists urgency that bypasses formation, discernment, or interior freedom.
- ✓ Do not romanticize solitude: Paul's withdrawal was followed by integration into community. Formation involves personal attentiveness and communal testing, blessing, and sending.
- ✓ Make room for hidden forms of mission: Anna's waiting, caregiving, prayer, hospitality, reconciliation, faithful presence, and quiet attention are not lesser callings.
- ✓ Keep returning to the central movement: Mission begins in God, not in us. Calling flows from identity, not achievement. Formation precedes and accompanies action. Shared life overflows naturally into love for the world.

Chapter 11: Belonging, Free, and Transformed

Session Fifteen: Belonging, Free, and Transformed

Session purpose

This final session helps participants gather the central movements of the book and receive them as one coherent invitation: to belong within the shared life of Father, Son, and Spirit, to live in the freedom of love-shaped atonement, and to become people increasingly formed for communion.

The session also turns attention toward the promised fulfillment of that shared life in new creation, where God dwells fully with humanity and belonging becomes complete.

Central truth

Atonement brings us home. We are not merely forgiven from a distance, but welcomed into communion, formed in love, and destined for shared glory.

Key movement

This session moves from: *fear, distance, striving, and uncertain belonging to embrace, freedom, communion, and homecoming*

Participants are invited to ask not only, “Am I saved?” but also, “Do I know that I belong—and am I learning to live from that belonging?”

Before the group meets the facilitator should:

- Read Chapter 11 and the Epilogue.
- Reflect on which image most clearly communicates belonging: the family story, the hug and handshake, the prodigal son, the dance, the river of life, the welcome table, or the final “Here we are.”
- Consider inviting participants to bring a mug for the closing gathering, echoing the Epilogue.
- Choose only a few Scriptures. The chapter contains many images and themes, and the session should feel spacious rather than crowded.
- Be sensitive to participants whose experience of belonging has been shaped by adoption, rejection, grief, trauma, church wounds, family estrangement, or loss.
- Avoid forcing emotional disclosure. The subject of belonging is tender and may awaken both gratitude and grief.
- Prepare the session as both reflection and celebration.

Suggested Scriptures

A strong selection would be:

Luke 15:11–32

Romans 8:14–17, 31–39

Ephesians 3:14–21

John 17:20–24

Revelation 21:1–5 and 22:1–5

A shorter session could use Romans 8, John 17, and Revelation 21.

Suggested session flow

- Welcome and remembering the journey — 10 minutes
- The longing to belong — 15 minutes
- A hug or a handshake? — 20 minutes
- Freedom and formation — 15 minutes
- New creation and shared glory — 20 minutes
- Celebration, prayer, and blessing — 15 minutes

Opening reflection

Begin by asking:

- What word, image, truth, or practice from this book has stayed with you most strongly?
- Where has your understanding of God become larger?
- Where has your understanding of atonement changed?
- What has become more relational, hopeful, or freeing?

The facilitator may invite each person to offer one brief response before deeper discussion begins.

***Facilitator note:** This opening helps the group recognize that formation has already been taking place. The goal is not to review every chapter, but to notice what has taken root.*

The struggle to belong

Read Ephesians 3:14–19.

Ask:

- Why does Paul pray that believers may grasp and know the love of Christ if they are already Christians?
- What is the difference between being told that we belong and experiencing belonging?
- Why can rejection, loss, trauma, or shame make belonging difficult to receive?
- How does our image of God affect whether we feel welcomed or merely tolerated?

- What happens spiritually when someone believes, “That is your family,” rather than, “This is our family”?

The facilitator may briefly refer to the story of the son standing apart from the family celebration.

Ask:

- What does that story reveal about the human longing to belong?
- How can love be genuinely offered but still difficult to receive?
- What does patient, embodied belonging require from a community?
- How might churches unintentionally reinforce the feeling that some people are insiders and others are standing at the edge?

Facilitator sensitivity

Do not turn this into a discussion about why wounded people should simply trust more. Belonging often requires time, repeated presence, safety, and love that does not withdraw.

A hug or a handshake?

Tell or reread the story of the children changing the motion from shaking Jesus’ hand to embracing him.

Ask:

- What does a handshake communicate?
- What does an embrace communicate?
- How can bodily images reveal our theology?
- Have you imagined salvation more as a completed transaction or a restored relationship?
- What changes when atonement is understood as God closing the distance and bringing us home?

Read Luke 15:20–24.

Ask:

- What does the father do before the son can complete his prepared speech?
- What does the embrace communicate that a verbal acquittal alone would not?
- What would be lost if the father met the son at the boundary and merely shook his hand?
- How does the older brother reveal a transactional understanding of belonging?
- Where do we still prefer earned belonging because free belonging feels unfair or unsafe?

Read aloud: “A handshake keeps distance and completes an exchange. An embrace closes the gap and restores communion.”

Allow a moment of silence.

Extravagant, love-shaped atonement

Ask:

- What is the difference between being forgiven and being brought home?
- How does atonement as communion reshape confession?
- How does it reshape our response to failure?
- How does it affect the way we treat people whose failures are visible?
- Which response feels more familiar: “Please don’t call my father,” or “I need to call my father”?
- What image of God lies beneath each response?

A helpful summary:

Transactional atonement may leave us managing guilt and fear. Relational atonement forms us as sons and daughters who know where they stand.

Belonging and freedom

Read Romans 8:14–17 and 31–39.

Ask:

- What language of belonging appears in these verses?
- What does adoption communicate?
- What does the Spirit witness within us?
- What fears are challenged by the statement that nothing can separate us from God’s love?
- How might life change if we truly believed God delights in us rather than merely puts up with us?
- What would freedom from image management look like?
- What would freedom from striving look like?
- What would freedom to love look like?

Read aloud: “The result of atonement should be freedom—to be loved and to love.”

Ask:

- Where have you experienced that freedom?
- Where do you still feel the need to earn, prove, hide, or brace for rejection?

Presence in suffering

The chapter does not portray belonging as protection from pain. It shows belonging as God’s presence within pain.

Ask:

- What is the difference between believing God will prevent all suffering and trusting God will remain present within it?
- How does the story of sensing God's presence during caregiving deepen the meaning of belonging?
- What do you make of the message, "Everything is okay," arriving during grief?
- Have there been moments when God met you through another person, a word, a timing, or a quiet assurance?
- How does God's presence become part of our formation?

Facilitator note: *This is not a place to debate explanations for suffering. The emphasis is presence, not explanation.*

Formation as preparation for shared life

Read aloud: "Formation is not a side project. It is the slow work of becoming people who no longer hide, strive, or brace for rejection, but who can receive love and return love."

Ask:

- How has this book changed your understanding of spiritual formation?
- What are we being formed for?
- Why is self-improvement too small a goal?
- How do practices such as prayer, silence, community, Scripture, hospitality, surrender, and discernment prepare us for communion?
- Where do you notice yourself becoming more able to receive love?
- Where do you notice yourself becoming more able to return it?

A glimpse of the great 'Here We Are'

Read Revelation 21:1–5 and 22:1–5.

Ask:

- What moves toward what in this vision?
- Why is it significant that the holy city comes down?
- What does this reveal about creation?
- What is healed?
- What is restored?
- What forms of distance disappear?
- How does this vision differ from an understanding of salvation focused primarily on escape?

Read aloud: "Scripture does not end with escape, but with embrace."

Ask:

- What hope does this image awaken?
- How might belief in renewed creation shape the way we live in the world now?
- How does it affect care for bodies, creation, justice, reconciliation, and community?
- What does it mean to say that new creation is participation in the eternal life of the Triune God?

Shared glory fulfilled

Read John 17:20–24.

Ask:

- What does Jesus desire for those who follow him?
- How do unity, glory, love, and presence belong together?
- What might it mean for this prayer to be fulfilled completely in new creation?
- How does shared glory differ from replacing God or becoming divine in God's place?
- Why is communion a better word than absorption?

A helpful summary:

Shared glory means participation by grace. We remain ourselves, fully healed and fully alive, dwelling within the love of God and in restored communion with one another.

The end becomes the beginning

Invite participants to reflect on the chapter's closing images:

the new Eden,
the river of life,
the healing of the nations,
the welcome table,
the air of love,
the meeting of "Here I AM" and "Here I am,"
and the final response, "Here we are."

Ask:

- Which image most clearly communicates hope to you?
- Which image feels like home?
- What do you long to see healed?
- What does "Here we are" communicate that "Here I am" cannot?
- How does the book's movement from individual availability to shared belonging reflect the life of the Trinity?

Core discussion questions

The facilitator should choose only those most appropriate for the group.

Understanding

- Why is belonging a theological issue rather than merely an emotional need?
- How does a transactional view of atonement affect spiritual formation?
- What does adoption communicate about salvation?
- How does the New Testament describe the relationship between atonement and new creation?
- Why does Scripture's final vision emphasize God dwelling with humanity?
- What does shared glory mean?

Personal reflection

- Where have you struggled to believe that you belong?
- Do you more often imagine Jesus offering a handshake or an embrace?
- When you fail, do you instinctively move toward God or away from God?
- What has helped you experience God's presence?
- Where do you still hide, strive, or brace for rejection?
- Which image from the chapter most deeply speaks to you?

Formation

- What would it mean to live as someone who knows where they stand with God?
- How might belonging free you to love others more generously?
- What practice from this book do you hope to continue?
- How has your understanding of the Trinity changed your relationships?
- What does God seem to be forming in you?
- How might your life become a place where others experience welcome and belonging?

Spiritual practice

From handshake to embrace

Invite participants to sit quietly with open hands.

The facilitator may say:

- *Bring to mind the way you most naturally imagine meeting Jesus.*
- *Do you stand at a distance?*
- *Do you wait to see whether you are accepted?*
- *Do you prepare an explanation?*

- Do you expect a handshake?

Pause.

- *Now imagine Jesus moving toward you.*
- *Not evaluating.*
- *Not withholding.*
- *Not completing a transaction.*
- *Welcoming.*
- *Embracing.*
- *Bringing you home.*

Pause between each line:

- *Father, teach me to receive myself as your beloved child.*
- *Jesus, close the distance I still imagine between us.*
- *Holy Spirit, bear witness within me that I belong.*
- *Where I hide, call me into the light.*
- *Where I strive, teach me to rest.*
- *Where I fear rejection, let your love become deeper than my fear.*
- *Where I have stood at the edge, draw me into communion.*
- *Let me live loved.*
- *Let me live loving.*
- *Let me become a place of welcome for others.*

Allow some time of silence.

Notice, Receive, Practice, Share

Notice

Where do you still live as though belonging must be earned?

Receive

In Christ, you are not standing at the boundary. You have been welcomed into the shared life of God.

Practice

Return during the week to one image of belonging from the chapter: the embrace, the dance, the river, the table, or the words “Here we are.”

Share

Offer someone else a form of belonging through presence, welcome, listening, forgiveness, hospitality, or affirmation.

Closing question

What does it mean for you now to say, “I belong within the shared life of God”?

Closing celebration

This would be a natural place to incorporate the Epilogue.

- ❖ Participants could bring a favorite mug, or mugs could simply be available. Serve coffee, tea, or another drink and invite each person to share briefly:
- ❖ One truth they are taking with them,
one practice they hope to continue,
or one way they have experienced God’s shared life during the study.

The facilitator may say: We have spent these weeks speaking about the shared life of God. Now we receive one another around a table as everyday theologians—still learning, still being formed, and still invited to pour what we have received.

Closing prayer

Father, Son, and Spirit—

*How can we ever thank you
for the shared life you offer?*

*You have not met us at a distance
or completed a transaction and sent us away.*

*You have embraced us,
adopted us,
indwelt us,
and brought us home.*

Teach us to live as those who belong.

Free us from hiding, striving, fear, and shame.

*Form us into people who can receive love
and return love.*

*Let the communion we taste now
become welcome for others.*

*Keep before us the hope of new creation,
when every fracture is healed,
every tear is wiped away,
and your dwelling with humanity is finally unbroken.*

*Until that day,
teach us to receive your life
and to pour it.*

Here you are.

Here we are.

Amen.

Facilitator notes:

- ✓ **Let the session feel like a conclusion.** Do not overload the final gathering with new theological material. The chapter gathers the book's themes rather than beginning a new argument.
- ✓ **Do not rush stories of rejection or grief.** Participants may respond deeply to the themes of adoption, family, loss, or exclusion. Make room for silence and tenderness.
- ✓ **Avoid sentimentalizing belonging.** Belonging is not mere warmth. It includes truth, freedom, healing, endurance, transformation, and restored communion.
- ✓ **Keep atonement relational.** The key contrast is not legal versus non-legal language. It is distance versus communion, transaction versus homecoming, and fear versus freedom.
- ✓ **Let new creation generate hope.** The purpose of eschatology here is not speculation. It is confidence that God will complete what has begun: creation renewed, bodies restored, relationships healed, and shared life made whole.
- ✓ **End with gratitude.** The Epilogue gives the study an appropriately warm final posture: gratitude for scholars, ordinary believers, shared conversation, and the life of God continually received and poured.

Keep returning to the final movement.

We belong.

We are being freed.

We are being transformed.

We are being prepared for shared life made whole.

For the appendices, I would add only a brief note at the end of the facilitator guide:

Using the Appendices

The appendices are optional resources rather than assigned sessions. Facilitators may introduce them when they support the needs or interests of a particular group.

Appendix A may support individuals interested in conversational prayer.

Appendix B may be used when a group needs a structured discernment practice.

Appendix C offers a concise overview of the biblical “Here I am” pattern.

Appendix D may help groups wanting further comparison of atonement models.

Appendix E provides deeper reflection on shared glory and formation.

Appendix F supports further study of Psalm 22 and the crucifixion narratives.

That keeps the main guide focused while still making the appendices easy to use.