

BEING THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST:

A Vision for Transformation

By Daniel Vestal

A Study Guide

By Ronny Russell



Cooperative Baptist
FELLOWSHIP

CBF Leadership Team

Daniel Vestal

Executive Coordinator

Bo Prosser

Coordinator for Congregational Life

Production Team

Rick Bennett

Director of Congregational Life

Ronny Russell

Writer

Pastor, Mission Baptist Church, Locust,, NC

Interior Design and Typesetting

PerfecType, Nashville, TN

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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

P.O. Box 450329

Atlanta, Georgia 31145

www.thefellowship.info

770.220.1600

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1. Beginnings: Receiving the Presence of Christ

Gathering Prayer:

Welcome, Heavenly Father. You come suddenly, incrementally, constantly. Your Resurrected Being means that you are present with us from early morning's sunrise to the last light of day. You are with us in the darkness. Present. Real. Alive. Loving.

Focal Scripture: I Corinthians 15:9-10 (NIV)

9For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Reflection:

The Apostle Paul understood his place in the Kingdom of God which is a Kingdom of Resurrection. Elsewhere he would declare, *I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength (Philippians 4:13 NIV)*. Without the presence of Christ living in him, Paul was

undeserving of his calling as an apostle. Without the presence of Christ living in him, he would likely have remained a persecutor and murderer.

Discuss in your group what application the presence of Christ has for your church. Give an honest analysis as to the validity of this statement: “Our church relies too much on programs, budgets and buildings and not enough on the grace and power of the Living Christ.”

Faith Story:

The author lifts up Mary as a model of one for whom receiving Christ was a continuous experience. Beyond your initial conversion experience, have there been times when you have “received” Christ? Spend a few minutes reflecting on such times in light of 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 and Philippians 4:13 by answering the following questions and be prepared to share them with your group:

- What new power have you experienced recently as a result of Christ living in you?
- Did this power come as a result of your own striving or did it just come suddenly?

Vision:

Do we really believe Paul’s assertion that we can “do all things through Christ who gives us strength” or is that nothing more than an empty platitude for us; i.e., the theologically correct thing to say in a pinch? Ask members of your group to recall a time when the presence of Christ was evident in the following situations:

- Times of fear
- Times of guilt or shame
- Times of anger

Read the online article on “The Exchanged Life” found in this link: <http://www.gmdenver.org/exlf1&2.html>. Talk about your new learnings, if any, during group time.

Closing Prayer

Lord of Heaven, receiving You is simple, but not easy. We have been guilty this day of feeling self-sufficient far beyond what we ought. Deliver us from pride and humble us with a recognition of our need. Continue to surprise us with Resurrection. In the name of the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. Amen.



2. The Basics: Nurturing the Presence of Christ

Gathering Prayer:

You are standing at our door, knocking, waiting to enter and give us life. Help us, Present One, to open our life to Your life. We want to receive Your presence, even as You want to be present with us and fill us.

We want to come to You as little children, trusting and welcoming. Surprise us with joy this day. Grow us in faith as a child grows in wisdom and stature. We ask this in the Present and Powerful name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Focal Scripture (Genesis 2:8-9 NIV):

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Reflection:

In Ephesians 3:19 Paul's prayer was that his readers would "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." This was God's intention for humans from the beginning. The two trees in the Garden were (1)the tree of life and (2)the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God's plan was for the man to choose the tree of life. Knowledge of good and evil was about law and works, life was about grace. Life is freely given from the Heavenly Father.

We don't receive good works. We receive Christ! One of the places where Christ is found is in the Living Word (the Bible). From this relationship with the Living Christ grows the fruit of righteousness and good works.

Faith Story:

It is important to practice being transparent with your group in these study guide exercises. Unfortunately, it is true too frequently that in church settings we have learned to be less than honest, lest we be perceived as spiritual weaklings.

Share with the group your honest assessment of your habits (or lack thereof) of Bible reading and study. Can you think of a time when the truth of the gospel became very real and alive to you? Share this experience with the group. Share your failings and shortcomings when it comes to your reading and study of God's Word. Why do you think you have failed in this area? Have you ever experienced weeping and trembling as a result of an encounter with God?

Vision:

Put yourself in the story of Mary and Martha in John 12:1-8. Visualize that you are Mary at the feet of Jesus.

- What are the sights, sounds, and smells that you are experiencing?
- What do you see when you look up into the face of Jesus?
- What is Jesus saying to you?

Other group exercises:

- Share some ways you think we put Jesus at OUR feet?

THE BASICS

- Set aside some time this week for a personal silent retreat of at least 2-3 hours. Take nothing but a Bible, notepad and pen and listen to the voice of God. One suggestion is to spend some more time with the John 12:1-8 passage, allowing it to speak to you and wash over you.

Closing Prayer:

Put to death in our being the pride and busyness that is part of our human condition. Raise us to a new life of humility, freedom, purpose and peace.

Cleanse us with Your power to overcome all that enslaves us. In the Priceless name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.



3. Prayer: Practicing the Presence of Christ

Gathering Prayer:

Gracious God, we acknowledge before we speak to You that You have already initiated this dialogue. Thank You for this great privilege of being able to speak directly to the One who has made the world and everything and all of us in it.

Grant us wisdom, Your wisdom to discern Your presence in our lives this day and all our days. Amen.

Focal Scripture (Joel 2:28-30a NLT):

28 “Then, after doing all those things,

I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy.

Your old men will dream dreams,

and your young men will see visions.

29 In those days I will pour out my Spirit

even on servants—men and women alike.

30 And I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the earth—

Reflection

In Joel 2 the prophet is describing a time of great need among God's people. He speaks during a time of great alarm, fear, darkness, and destruction. The call is sounded for fasting, weeping, mourning (vs. 12), and prayer (vs. 17). God answers the prayer and restores the fortune and faith of His people (vss. 21-27). Then comes the passage quoted in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost (vss. 28-29). God promises to pour out His Spirit on all the people resulting in dreams and visions for all—dreams and visions of great wonders in heaven and earth.

Think of prayer as vision, being able to see what is not yet there. We approach God with three things in mind: a need, a reaching out to Jesus, a belief that God can do something about it. Needs are not just about us and what may be wrong in our life. We also have a need to give praise and gratitude to God and a need to just be present with God.

Participate with your group as members express a need in each of their lives. Then participate as members meditate and visualize with their mind's eye, that need being met. Think of it this way—what would it look like if God answers that prayer. Are these not prayers of faith when we remember that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1 NIV).

Faith Story

What is your experience with different kinds of prayer?*

The author lists eight different forms of vocal prayer: talk, sing, chant, shout, whisper, groan, lament/laugh, and babble. Which ones have you experienced? Not experienced? Describe your experiences.

Vision

As a spiritual formation exercise, practice at least one new form of vocal prayer weekly over the next several weeks. Journal your thoughts and feelings about your new experience and share them with your study group.

*For a good discussion of the different ways people experience God see Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways*, Zondervan, 2000.

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Practice meditation as a prayer form. Read a biblical passage and spend 20 – 30 minutes allowing the word to wash over you. You may use a passage of your own choosing or one of the following: Psalm 63, Psalm 139, or John 13. Visualize yourself in the passage and that God is speaking to you concerning the truths to be found therein. Journal your thoughts and feelings and be prepared to share them with your study group.

Closing Prayer

God of wonders, beyond our galaxy. You are Holy, Holy. The universe declares your Majesty. And you are Holy, Holy.* Amen.

*This prayer is the chorus from the song by Third Day titled “God of Wonders.”



4. Contemplative Prayer: Resting in the Presence of Christ

Opening Prayer:

God of Revealing, reveal to me the fears that cause me to avoid silence. Restore my courage to be alone with myself and with You, my Maker.

Focal Scripture (Revelation 4:11 NIV):

11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

Reflection:

In Revelation 4 the 24 elders fall down before their creator to simply give honor to their creator. Nothing more, nothing less. This is a form of contemplative prayer – to just be and be still before God. This has been described by those who practice it as perhaps the most

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difficult form of prayer. Based on your acquired understanding of contemplative prayer from reading chapter IV, why do you think this is true?

My wife and I have been married for almost forty years. We can be traveling by car and drive for miles without saying a word and without feeling any pressure to do so. This is a result of our great love for each other. We don't feel the need to make conversation, to impress, or to cajole. We just enjoy being in each other's presence. We relish it, plan for it, and even feel a void when it doesn't happen.

Contemplative prayer is this way. It is simply being in and being aware of the presence of the Living Christ. Who are those people in your life with whom you feel perfectly at ease just being in their presence? Describe the feelings you have and the experiences you have when you are with these persons.

Sue Monk Kidd, in the preface to Henri Nouwen's *With Open Hands*, shares this insight into her spiritual journey:

I'd had a solid Protestant upbringing but I was clueless about the passionate landscape of the interior life, about the deep and forgotten art of tending the soul and transforming the mind and the heart—the very stuff of prayer.

Does Kidd's statement describe your experience (or lack thereof) with the "interior life?" What do you think a "passionate landscape of the interior life" would look like?

Faith Story:

Which of the following statements best describes your experience of contemplative prayer:

- I have been clueless when it comes to contemplative prayer
- I have avoided it because I fear silence
- I have practiced it on occasion
- I practice it frequently

Share your answers with your group.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

Vision:

Choose one of the forms of kataphatic prayer—music, nature, artistic beauty as described by the author. Practice contemplative prayer using the one you have chosen. Use some of your next group time to debrief about your experiences. Try another kataphatic prayer form the next week, then the other the following week.

Choose a faith word that is meaningful to you. Examples would be words like grace, love, justice, righteousness, community, or relationship. Practice the apophatic form of “centering” prayer using the word you have chosen. Be prepared to share your experiences at your next group time.

Closing Prayer:

Holy One, open our hearts to hear you through expressions of beauty that are all around us. Focus our minds only on You for a prolonged season. Amen.



5. Personal Transformation: Changed by the Presence of Christ

Opening Prayer:

O Creator and Catalyst, change in us the most difficult parts of our spirit—the long-held grudge, the harbored resentment, the seething anger, the life-long prejudices. We ask it in the changeless, yet transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Focal Scriptures (Romans 12:1-2 The Msg):

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Reflection:

Practicing the presence of Christ can be life changing. Anger is one of the more universal character flaws. This emotion is expressed in all kinds of forms and degrees. It is part of our everyday existence. You will be given an exercise to practice over the next four weeks than can be applied to other areas of your life.

Faith Story:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Bless those who curse you.” This is tough. Unkindness, for example, is a tool that people use to get through life. So is unforgiveness.

If you get an obscene gesture in traffic, what do you do? Our habit may be to give it back. However, if we have been disciplined to want the best for everyone we will do something different. Blessing those who curse us is to invoke God’s blessings on them.

Vision:

Keep a daily journal over the next four weeks.* (Note: this can be done in a shorter version over a period of one week). As you progress through this exercise, read and study the Scriptures you can find that relate to anger.

1. Week One: Keep a journal of the times people cursed you (flashed an obscene gesture, for example, or said a mean thing to you, inconvenienced you, irritated you, whatever—see examples below)

In group time, talk about what, in your opinion, made people do all that.

2. Week Two: Keep a record of your responses to the times people curse you this week. Also write down why you responded in the way you did, what you wish you had done, etc.

In group time, talk about your responses and why you responded the ways you did.

*This idea was adapted from a “Discipleship in the Local Congregation” seminar conducted by Dallas Willard at Hollifield Learning Center, Hickory, North Carolina, November 2, 2007.

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3. Week Three: Practice blessing those who curse you.

In group time, talk about the ways you practiced blessing those who “cursed” you.

4. Week Four: Practice blessing people preemptively, not waiting until someone is unkind to you. Just practice giving blessings from the beginning in the morning to the end of your day.

In group time, talk about how this is changing your heart; i.e., how you are being transformed.

Examples of being cursed:

- Your teenage child calls you an idiot...for imposing curfew, or whatever. Note: adolescents are good at doing this without words.
- Someone in the checkout line takes an exorbitant amount of time to finish their transaction. You are in a hurry and you grow impatient with them because of what you see as their inconsideration.
- You are at a fast food restaurant and the service is anything but fast, causing you to have to stand in line for a long time.

Ending Prayer:

Giving Lord, we thank you for the small and large ways Your presence informs and transforms our lives. In the name of the Perfect and Risen Savior, Amen.



6. Christian Community: Experiencing the Presence of Christ with Others

Gathering Prayer:

Dear Gathering God, You have made us to live in community with you and with others. We can eloquently and sincerely express our love to you but then, well, our neighbor enters the picture. Help us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

Focal Scripture (2 Corinthians 5:17-20 NASB):

17Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

19namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Reflection:

The followers of Jesus do not exist in a vacuum but community. This community consists of other followers of all ages, past and present. This community is global and local and its mission is a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19).

As a group, make an attempt at describing what an authentic expression of a local community of believers would look like? Do you know of any examples of this ideal community? How close is your church to this ideal?

Faith Story:

In preparation for your group time, write down the top five richest experiences of your Christian faith; i.e., those times when Christ was most real to you. Observe how many of these were experienced as part of a community.

As a group, discuss the following:

- What part did the faith community play in your most memorable Christian experiences?
- Have you had personal and private experiences with God that made you wish others could have been with you to share in the experience? What were they?

Vision:

The first exercise involves asking the group facilitator to assign each member of the group a “report” on some of the Christian saints through the centuries. Examples would be people like Saint Augustine, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Claire of Assisi, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Ignatius, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Katherine of Siena, Teresa of Calcutta, others. Give a brief summary of your report to the group. One quick source to use is *Upper Room Spiritual Classics®*, *Series 1*, *Series 2*, and *Series 3*. Other articles can be found online.

As a second exercise, make it a point to spend time with a person of another Christian faith expression, especially one with whom you would have the greatest differences in beliefs and traditions. Practice the art of listening as you dialogue with them about their beliefs and practices.

Closing Prayer:

Dear Reconciling Savior, make room in our hearts for people of different faith expressions, both living and dead. Open our minds to learn what we can in practice and open our hearts to love where we have heretofore been unwilling to love. Amen.



7. Christ-Likeness Through Suffering: Being the Presence of Christ by Embracing Sacrifice

Gathering Prayer:

Man of Sorrows, forgive us for all the pain we avoid that would enrich our lives if we would but embrace it. Teach us the way of suffering and sacrifice, not for self grandiosity, but for exalting the living Christ.

Focal Scripture (Luke 9:22-25 NASB)

22...The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.” 23And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. 24“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. 25“For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?

Reflection:

No one can seriously claim to follow Jesus without dealing with the problem of suffering and sacrifice. Sacrifice is possible from our human standpoint precisely because Jesus has suffered. Christ abiding in us not only enables us to suffer, forgive, obey, and serve but His abiding in us gives us those characteristics as part of our very identity, our new identity in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Ask members of the group to discuss the appeal of the so-called “prosperity gospel” which is the idea that following Jesus will lead to health, wealth, and happiness.

Faith Story:

I remember early in my ministry when a young mother said to me that she wished she had the faith of Miss Opal. Miss Opal was an older woman who was known for her deep and abiding faith. She was also a woman who had suffered a great deal—she had lost a teenage son in an accident, her father had died after a long and debilitating illness, and her husband of over twenty-five years had left her for another woman. As I observe the life of the spiritual giants I know, there seems to be one common thread in their spiritual journey—they have all suffered greatly.

Be prepared to share with your group a time in your life when you suffered. What affect did your suffering have on your faith? Was it enhanced or damaged?

Think of people you know whom you would describe as godly and saintly people? Do you know instances of suffering in their life?

Vision:

As a group, think of a project that involves sacrifice on the part of the members of the group. It may be something like a series of nursing home visits, a ministry project to a local homeless shelter, cleaning toilets at a local park, or something similar that involves unpleasantness and inconvenience. When the project is completed, have a time of debriefing and share with each other what you learned from the experience.

Closing Prayer:

O Cross-bearing Christ, teach us that joy and sorrow are not mutually exclusive. Teach us that humility and suffering are the way to real life. In the name of the One who paid the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Resources:

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain; The Intellectual Problem Raised By Human Suffering, Examined with Sympathy and Realism*, Harper/Collins, 2001.

Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God: 3 Questions No One Asks Aloud*, Zondervan, 1988.



8. Christ-Likeness Through Serving: Being the Presence of Christ by Engaging in Ministry

Gathering Prayer

Gracious God, You taught us to serve rather than to be served. We confess our tendency to define greatness by how many serve us. Forgive us because we know that this is a great injustice for ourselves and for Your Kingdom. In the name of Him who gave His life as a ransom. Amen.

Focal Scripture (Mark 10:42-45 NASB):

*42*Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. *43*“But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; *44*and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. *45*“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Reflection:

We have been given the privilege of being co-missionaries with Christ. John 1 says that “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” and we are told in Acts 10:38 that Jesus “went about doing good...because God was with him.” Jesus told his followers in John 20:21 “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Discuss with the group what Jesus meant when he said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” What did the Father send Jesus to be, to do? What, in turn, has Jesus sent us to be, to do?

Faith Story:

Recall a time when you engaged in ministry. What kind of ministry was it? How was it a ministry of Jesus? Was it a ministry of word or deed? Be prepared to share your answers with the group.

Think about your occupation. Reflect on and be prepared to discuss with the group the ways your life’s work can be (or is) a ministry of deeds. Are there ways that it can also be a ministry of word? Join hands in the group and pray for one another that everyone can transition their life’s work into a ministry of word and deed in a way that honors the Christ who abides in them.

Vision:

As a group, plan and carry out an A.R.K. (Act of Random Kindness) in your community. After the event, spend some time as a group debriefing and reflecting on how the act was a ministry of word or deed. Also, spend some time discussing how your act joined with Jesus in his mission to “go and make disciples.”

Think of one prophetic ministry in which your group (or church) can be engaged. Read, meditate, and study carefully the Scriptures under the heading “A Prophetic Ministry.” In light of what you learn, decide on one way you can be an authentically, biblical prophetic voice to the particular issue you have chosen.

Closing Prayer

Incarnate God, as You have engaged us in this world with Your saving grace, we go now to minister in Your name. Fill us with that grace as we engage with You in Your saving ministry to the world. Amen.

Resource:

Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Refreshing Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus With Others*, Regal Books, 2003.



9. A Christian Social Ethic:

Being the Presence of Christ by Struggling for Justice

Gathering Prayer

Our Wisdom, who art in heaven, grant us the ability to discern which injustice battles to choose and the wisdom to know how to fight those battles. Teach us to respect and value all of human life as the Spirit of Christ dwells in us and transforms us by His very presence.

Focal Scripture (Amos 5:7,24 NIV):

5:7 You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground. 23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Reflection:

The old country prophet Amos told it like it was when it came to Israel's lack of justice. He chided them over and over for neglecting and oppressing the poor and then for show-

ing up for worship as if nothing was wrong. Finally he calls for justice to roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream.

Social justice is not the cause of a liberal theology. It is the cause of a christocentric theology. Jesus takes up the cause of Amos. In Matthew 23 he says that when we appear before God on judgment day that how we treated the poor will be the determining factor in our judgment.

Why do you think evangelical Christianity has been guilty of ignoring the plight of the poor both at home and abroad? Discuss this with your group.

Faith Story:

Have you ever been on the receiving end of a gift given to you because someone thought you were poor? How did it feel? If you have not been the recipient of such a gift, do you think it would change the way you think about ministering to the poor? Why or why not?

The author lists some of the major moral issues in the U.S.: erosion of the family & attacks on marriage, loss of respect for the unborn, the growing disparity between rich and poor, the 40 million Americans who don't have health insurance, and a lingering racism. Discuss in your group why you think we choose only one or two of these issues to express our concern and neglect the others.

Vision:

What injustices abound in your community? Do they include any of the six above? Name them and list them on a whiteboard in your group. Choose one that your group feels is the most neglected? Why do you think it is the most neglected?

Begin as a group to develop a plan for how your group or church can address that particular issue. Don't be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. Begin by combating one small aspect of the problem and then move from there incrementally.

Close your group time by dividing into huddles. Have one huddle pray for courage, another to pray for serenity, and the third to pray for wisdom.

Closing Prayer:

O Listening Father, grant us the courage to risk failing and to even take the risk that someone will take advantage of our generous spirit. Give us such an awareness of the Presence of Christ in our lives that we will work with great resolve and without anxiety to battle an injustice. Finally, grant us the wisdom to discern what justice and righteousness really are. Amen.

Biography:

Ronny Russell is the lead pastor of Mission Baptist Church, Locust, North Carolina. www.missionchurch.org. He is author of *Can a Church Live Again?* Smyth & Helwys, 2003.