



Exploring Our Faith: *God Talk*



A Resource from the
Scottish United Reformed Church
& Congregational College

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Exploring Our Faith God Talk

Notes for Facilitators

The aims of these sessions...

We hope the sessions help people in our congregations feel more confident in talking about their faith. Generally, we are better at talking about the weather or catching up on family news than we are in talking about the Lord who calls us together and nurtures us at his table.

We hope that, in easy manageable steps, we feel more comfortable talking with people go to church with about our faith in the hope that will give us a bit of confidence to chat to those we know and love but who don't come to church so that they, too, may explore the faith.

The aims of these sessions...

The sessions build on each other and help groups become comfortable speaking about God. Further units will be developed which look at evangelism and faith basics.

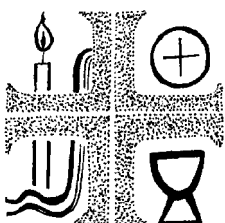
As the facilitator, your role is to...

As facilitator, your role is to gently ask questions, not talk too much about your own ideas but encourage people to share theirs. You need to be aware of people who speak less and gently draw them out with open questions. Eg: "Mary, what do you think about that?" or be prepared to gently challenge those talking too much: "thank you, Fred, what do the rest of us think?"

You also have a role in being time keeper – sometimes you may want to let discussion run on but generally try and keep an eye on the clock so that the material is given justice.

Commitment...

In order to, build up trust we suggest that people are invited to commit to coming to all four sessions and that if people miss the first you ask them to wait until the course is offered again rather than come to the second.



A word about venue and format

The four sessions could be used

- week after week over a four-week period
- on an away day or
- over a 24 hour retreat – once you've built in time for worship, reflection and food.

If you opt for a four-week period we suggest you don't meet in the church or the church hall. You could be daring and ask a local coffee shop, or pub, if you could have your meetings there – most would be only too pleased to have more customers! It is very powerful to talk about such deep stuff as we will be looking at during the *Exploring our Faith: God Talk* sessions in public. People at other tables listen in, people taking part in the group slowly find their confidence built up. If using a pub do make sure it doesn't show sporting events during your study – you won't hear each other. You might also want to be aware that some people may be uncomfortable in a pub. If meeting in a public venue seems too much then meet in someone's home – that can build up trust levels beautifully.

Numbers...

Aim for a group of between 6 and 8 people. Less than 6 and you may find you need to work harder to get people to chat freely more than 8 and you may find you work harder to draw out the quieter ones.

Hospitality...

Ensure the venue is warm and comfortable. Decide if you're offering refreshments – it might be more work but it helps set the scene and create a more welcoming atmosphere. Jesus seemed to spend much of time chatting to folk whilst eating.

You will need...

To have read through these notes and ALL the sessions before you start. You will need copies of the session sheet ready for everyone to have during the session and to take away with them.

Using the Sheets...

Give the sheets out at the start of each meeting. If you're able to print them in colour then people have an even nicer aide memoire to take away. Each week, when you get to it ask someone to read the *Reading* and someone else to read the *Thought for the Day*. If someone is a little less confident ask them before the meeting starts so they have time to read it through beforehand.

Preparation...

Of course, you need to read through all the material before you start the course. In this way you can see how the course is building up – and, practically, you can see what specific preparation you need to do! For session *Exploring Spirituality*, for example, you need to bring some objects along for people to reflect on.

Specific preparation...

Session 1: Exploring Why We Go to Church

This gentle session sets the scene, encourages people to talk and asks people to reflect on why they started to attend church in the first place and what keeps them coming. The Going Deeper session encourages people to

think about their feelings and the Wee Challenge is an encouragement to pray for someone who needs God in their life. The Wee Challenge could also be a discussion starter if you need to fill some time – otherwise it's something to reflect on at home.

Session 2: Exploring Spirituality

If you are doing these sessions weekly ask how they found praying for the person they identified in the Wee Challenge section last week. You need to provide some objects for reflection. We suggest: a Bible, Hymn book, lit candle, picture of the earth from space, picture of a mountain or natural scenery, picture of a crowd of diverse people, and a picture of Jesus – if possible one that shows an unusual portrayal of Jesus – eg Christ of St John of the Cross by Dali, or a black Jesus. Have these arranged on a table in the centre of the room you will be using.

Session 3: Exploring How We feel About God

Recap on the Wee Challenge of Session 2 and ask people to answer the question posed.

You may wish to have the recording of the song, God is Watching Us, for people to listen to.

You need a piece of A4 paper for each person, in landscape mode, with two lines drawn on it. One about an inch from the top and one about an inch from the bottom. You will need pens or pencils for everyone.

Session 4: Exploring How God Feels About Us

Remember to ask participants how they would answer the question posed in the Wee Challenge at the end of the last session. You will need the pictures of Jesus at the end of this pack printed out and you will need to be ready, in the opening discussion to define "us" as the people in the room, the wider community, our nation, or our church – whatever works best to get people talking! Don't worry about going through each definition of "us" but when one works keep with it. In the Going Deeper session we are trying to get people to realise that God's love for us doesn't change, that our response to God's love should call us to change into an ever closer discipleship and that it is pleasing to God when we change – turn our lives around in response to His call. However, let people gently explore these themes.

**Most
Importantly...**

There are no right or wrong answers as the sessions are designed to get people to think about their feelings around Church. If someone, or you, tries to correct a speaker they are less likely to share their views again!

Session 1: Exploring Why We Go To Church

Discussion Starters

- How did you come to be in this church?
- How involved are you?
- Why do you stay?

Reading

All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 44 – 47
New Revised Standard Version

Thought for the Day

The passage from the Book of Acts gives one of the first snapshots of the earliest church. Their experience of Church was much more radical than ours – they shared their property, possessions and money. Daily worship at the Temple was supplemented with food shared in each other's homes. This community life glued them together and enabled the earliest Church to grow rapidly. We know this pattern of Christian living didn't last – though it has been preserved in monastic communities. The practices of Daily Prayer, eating together, sharing what they had, giving to those in need, having "glad and humble" hearts and praising God are things we may find are given expression – in different ways – in our own congregation.





Going Deeper

- How do you feel if you can't come to church one week?
- Have you ever been out of the habit of coming to worship – if so how easy (or difficult) was it to come back?
- What part/s of the service do you value most – and why?
- How do you feel if you go to worship somewhere else?



A Wee Challenge

Worship is for our benefit – not God's! God has no need of our praises but delights in them. At times worship challenges us, at other times it soothes us, always we should be reminded that it is in worship that we meet God.

Amongst other things, Worship should make us feel better about ourselves, the world and God. If we are feeling low then the experience of worship should lift us out of ourselves and help us focus on God.



Who do we know whose life would be enriched if they worshipped regularly? Pray for them every day this coming week – that God will make Himself known to them in a new way and that you might find ways to show practical, common sense, love and concern to them.

Session 2: Exploring Spirituality

Discussion Starters

- Are there particular parts of the service at church where you feel close to God? Eg: the hymns, during the prayers, after receiving Holy Communion, a time of silence?
- Why do these aspects of the service make you feel close to God?

Reading



O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air,
and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Psalm 8

New Revised Standard Version

Thought for the Day



The Psalmist looked at the natural world and had an experience of God's presence. For religious people this sense of God's presence is what is meant by "spirituality." Many things may evoke this sense of spirituality within us – a trip through mountains, a beautiful sunset, a hymn, the silence in church, the feeling of peace after receiving Communion. Spirituality may be evoked by something secular – a piece of music, a painting – anything which gives us a sense of connection with God. Everyone has spiritual experiences – that sense of connection with something beyond ourselves – but not everyone makes the link between that spiritual sense and God. Often people don't expect to find spirituality within the Church – possibly because we're not good at talking about how we feel when we are in God's presence.

Going Deeper



- Look at the objects on the table – do any of these evoke a sense of spirituality in you? Which ones and why?
- Where does God come in our understanding of what is spiritual?
 - When do you, or have you, felt close to God?
 - Where do you, or have you, felt close to God?
 - How do you, or have you, felt close to God?

A Wee Challenge



Before our next session have a think about which aspects of this discussion on spirituality have you particularly valued and which have you found challenging? We will discuss this at the start of our next session.

Session 3: Exploring How We Feel About God



Discussion Starters

“Christ is the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.” (Author Unknown)

“God is watching us, God is watching us
God is watching us from a distance.”

Lyrics from a song by Julie Gold – you can hear it performed by Nanci Griffith at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCzORgC1NpM>

Consider the two statements.

- Which do you find the more attractive and why?
- How would you describe the effect (does) that each of them has on you?

Reading



Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ‘Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

Job 38:1-11

New Revised Standard Version

Thought for the Day



God can feel overwhelming at times. Job has suffered a whole series of life calamities that have been authorised by God. Job's patience is now exhausted and he questions God about this situation.

God "answers" with a series of questions based around the fact that God is the author of creation. The questions go on and on, seemingly designed to make Job feel small in the face of divine grandeur.

Of course, the reality is that in comparison to God we are small – puny – in comparison. Yet God does not ignore or dismiss Job out of hand, taking the time to respond to human concerns, though the answers given are neither simple nor easy.

Going Deeper



- On the sheet provided, consider the two parallel lines running across the page. These are timelines running from your birth until now.
- On the top line mark evens in in your life that you have experienced as "highs" and "lows". **You will not be expected to share the details of these events with others in the group.**
- On the lower line write down how you felt (about) God at those times – for example, God as close or distant, absent or irrelevant, uncaring or loving.
- In conversation with others discuss how the events in our lives affect how we experience God and how we feel about God.



A Wee Challenge

For sharing at the next session: In conversation, someone you know says, "With all this suffering in the world today there just can't be a God." How would you respond to that statement, using only one or two short sentences?

Session 4: Exploring How God Feels About Us

Discussion Starters



- Look at the pictures of Jesus. Which ones do you like or dislike? Why?
- If God came in here today how do you think he'd feel about us?
- Why do you think God would feel like that?

Reading



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

*St John 1: 1 – 5, 10-14, 16
NRSV Anglicised Version*

Thought for the Day



The passage from St John's Gospel is often read at Christmas – it gives the deep theology behind the Christmas stories – in Jesus, God became one of us. We've been thinking about how God feels about us – we know how God feels about us because God loved us so much that He became one of, and one with, us. God's ultimate sacrifice was becoming human, entering into human experience in all its glory and tragedy, living life in all its complexity and, eventually, being subject to an unjust trial, execution and cruel death for us. God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead and exalting him as Lord of all. God delights in us – and in all of His creation.

God delights in us – always does – His delight in us is unchanging balanced by his views of our behaviour, his delight should change us rather than our sins changing God.



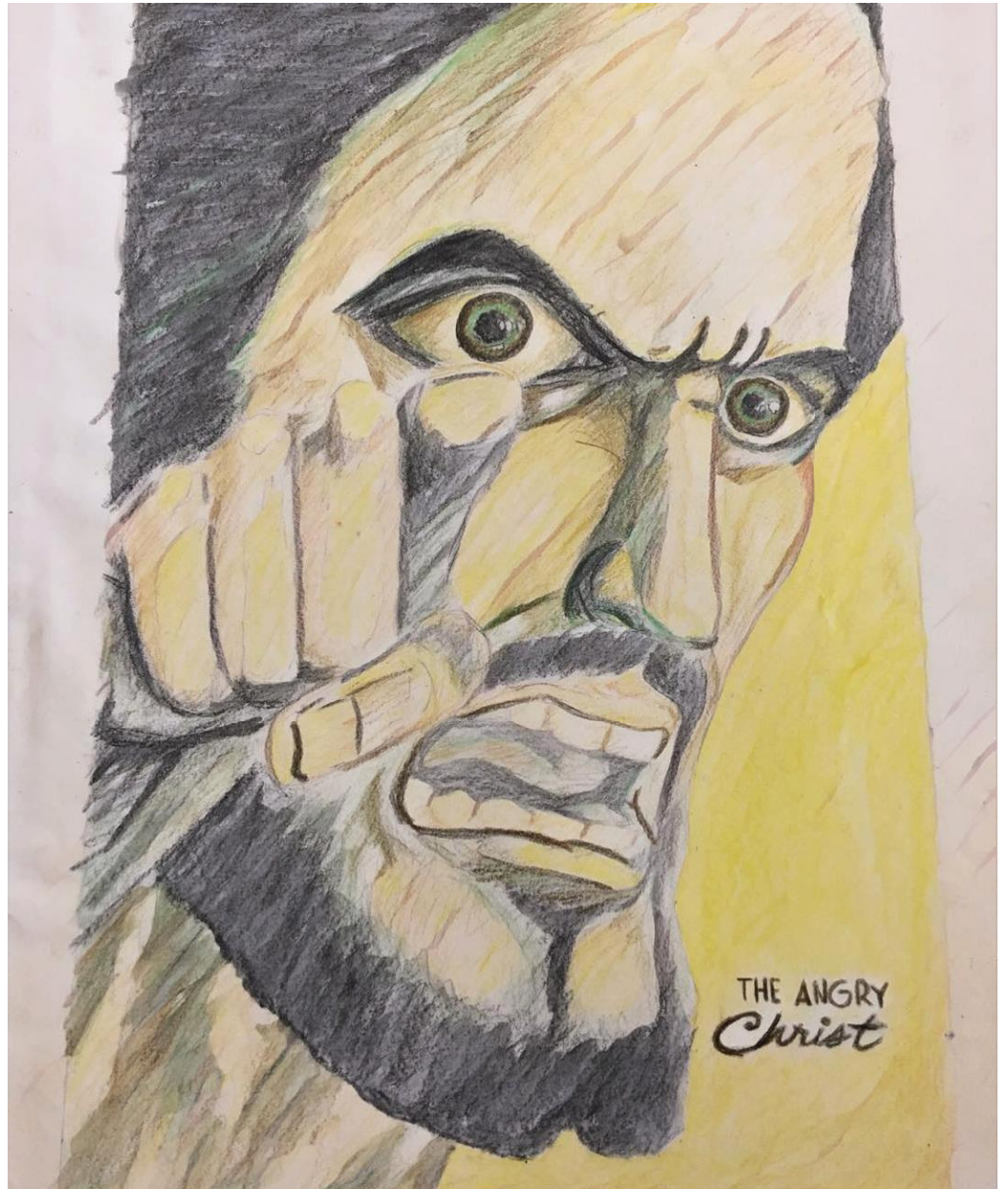
Going Deeper

- How does our experience of God's love encourage us to change?
- Do we think God can change His mind about us? Why/Why not?

A Wee Challenge



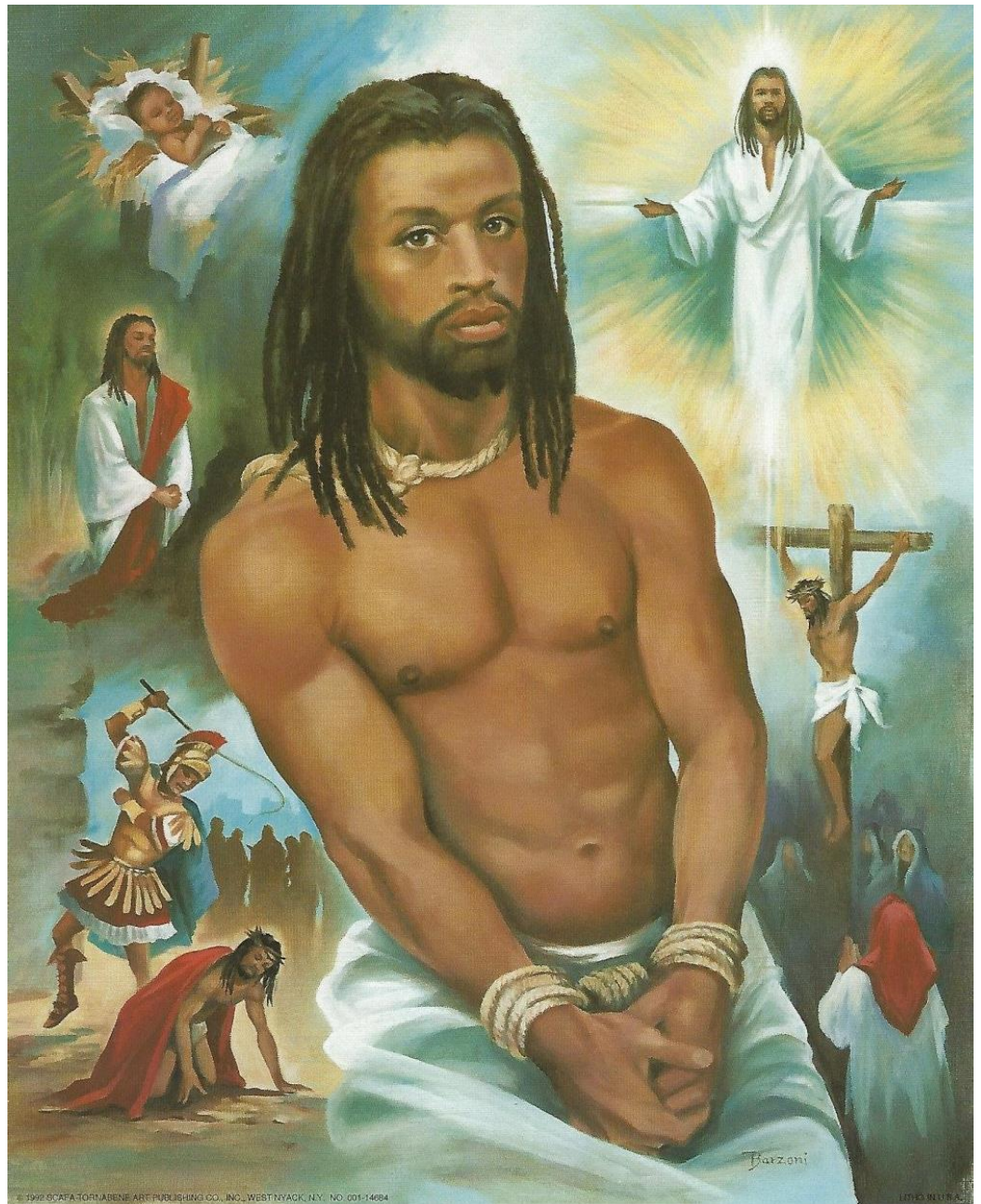
We have thought a little about God's delight in us and a bit about happiness. Think a little about the difference between happiness and joy – how do each relate to our feelings about God and how we think God feels about us?



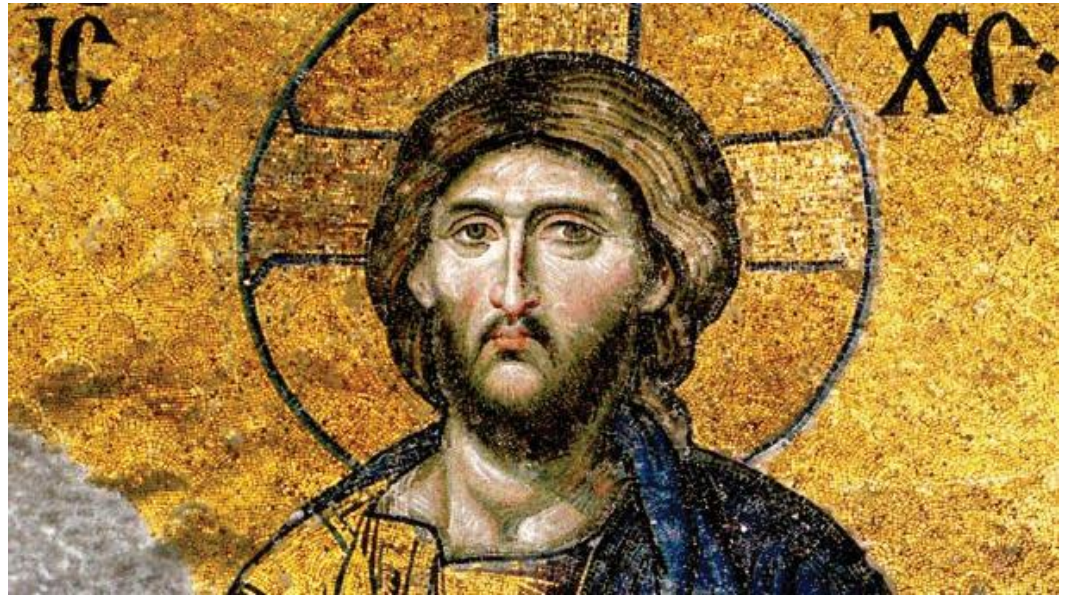
Lino Pontebon
The Angry Christ



Sieger Köder
The Washing of the Feet



His Voyage: Life of Jesus
VINCENT BARZONI



Mosaic, Aya Sofya, Istanbul