

COMMON GROUND

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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This guide is to be used in conjunction with *Common Ground: What All Christians Believe and Why It Matters* by Keith Drury (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2008).

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CONTENTS

How to Use This Guide	4
Introduction	6
1. Almighty God	7
2. Creator	8
3. Jesus Christ	9
4. The Virgin Birth	10
5. The Suffering, Death, and Burial of Jesus Christ	11
6. The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus	12
7. The Second Coming and Judgment	13
8. The Holy Spirit	14
9. The Holy Catholic Church	15
10. The Forgiveness of Sins	16
11. The Resurrection of the Body	17
12. The Life Everlasting	18



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to help you lead a small group or class through a discussion of the book *Common Ground: What All Christians Believe and Why It Matters* by Keith Drury. Here are five suggestions that will help your group get the most benefit out of its discussion.

First, encourage group participants to read each chapter before coming to the session. Some will; many won't. Those who don't read the book ahead of time should bring it with them and scan it during the session. They can still participate in the discussion, though the pre-readers will probably have more to contribute. It's important that at least 20 percent of your group read the chapter prior to the session. Otherwise, you'll risk having a jumbled discussion with little basis in sound doctrine.

If, despite your best efforts, most group members are not pre-reading the chapter, consider having people take turns reading sections to the group during the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the session. This will get everyone into the book and hopefully encourage pre-reading later on. If participants still are not interested in pre-reading the chapters, consider using a lecture approach. Use the section titles as an outline and present the content of the book as a lecture. Even then, freely read paragraphs here and there so people are inspired to read sound doctrine as part of their own devotional growth.

Second, open each discussion by reading the quote at the beginning of the chapter. They are real quotes by real people, though the names are fictitious. Each comes from a college level student in a church or university setting. The quotes show how people think today and remind us of the importance of sound doctrine. Avoid mocking of or demeaning the comments, since there may be people in your group who hold similar views. They should serve only to get the discussion going; don't let them dominate your entire group time.

Third, choose from two options for guiding the discussion. This guide contains a set of discussion questions for each chapter of the book. One option is for the discussion leader to simply ask the questions in the order in which they're given. Another option is to print out the questions so that each group member has a copy. Then you can invite participants to choose the questions they want to discuss in the order they want to discuss them. The first option makes for a more efficient and comprehensive look at each chapter. The second approach gives group members more of an opportunity to shape the discussion, especially those who have pre-read the material and are familiar with the question topics. Either method has the potential to stimulate edifying discussion.

Fourth, avoid hammering those with sub-Christian views. The church today has many Christians who are uninformed and therefore have a secular approach to doctrine. They have absorbed their

theology from their surrounding culture—TV talk shows, the Internet, popular books or music—not from the Bible and the ancient creeds of the Christian church. Still, branding people heretics, even in jest, will not accomplish your goal. Doctrine is a serious matter. People have died for the beliefs discussed in this book. It is no laughing matter. But allow for the fact that many Christians are ignorant of Christian doctrine and that it takes time for them to adopt thoroughly orthodox Christian beliefs. Your job as group leader will be similar to those ancient missionaries who entered new cultures where all kinds of sub-Christian beliefs prevailed. Yet they nudged and shepherded people, with tender compassion and solid teaching, to embrace authentically Christian doctrine. Ironically today's Christian church is in need of such missionaries today!

Fifth, end every session with praise and thanksgiving. Sound doctrine should inspire worship more than argument. Feel free to have hearty dialogue during the session, but always end with praise to God and a call to live a holy life. Be wary of ending any other way. Keep your eye on the clock and end the discussion in plenty of time to allow for praise and prayer. The “What about Us?” sections at the end of each chapter in the book is a poetic “how shall we then live” response to each doctrine. Consider inviting participants to read and meditate on this section quietly at the end of your group time. Or have someone prepare to read it aloud to the entire group. Each chapter of the book also includes a closing prayer. Close your session by having participants pray it silently or having one group member pray it aloud. Some group leaders might prefer to ask a group member to study the prayer ahead of time and then use it as a guide to praying an extemporaneous prayer. However you choose to do it, let every session end with glorifying God. After all, that is the end of good theology.

Have a great time in this book! Once you've completed it, you'll discover that sound doctrine can be life changing.



INTRODUCTION

The questions for this session are based on the section at the beginning of the book titled “Why We Study the Apostle’s Creed.” They are designed to either introduce the entire series or serve as a brief introduction to chapter 1.

1. Besides using creeds, in what other ways do we “underline the Bible” to bring out the most vital truths for Christians?

2. Discuss the statement: “Heresy is not believing something *beyond* the creeds (we all do that), but believing something *against* the creeds.”

3. List some beliefs or doctrines your church rejects but that other church traditions believe beyond the creeds. Then list some beliefs that your church holds beyond the creeds that others might reject. Finally, list some areas where all Christian churches agree.

4. Using the author’s “written in pencil, ink, and blood” model, list some beliefs that you think fit into each category.

5. Discuss whether congregations in the Free Church tradition, who seldom say the creeds, might benefit from a study of the creeds. Do you know any Christians (or denominations) that reject all or any part of the creeds? How much of the creed can an individual (or denomination) reject and still be Christian?



ALMIGHTY GOD

1. What is the difference in believing in only one God and believing our God is the top God or best God? How does this relate to your view of other non-Christian religions?
2. It is popular today to say that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even other religions all serve the same God. They say Jesus is one way of getting to the Father but there are other ways too. What do you think of this? Are there problems with this view? Are there positive aspects to this view?
3. What are some mistaken views of God the Father that can arise from our human circumstances? How would you answer the person who says, “If God is like a father, then I hate him”?
4. What is the doctrine of *providence*? How can we say that God provides us with a car and house when we ourselves purchased it with our own hard-earned money?
5. Make a chart of the various answers to the problem of evil (theodicy). If God is both almighty and good, how can bad things happen? Which one of the answers makes the most sense to you? Which would you use most often in discussing the problem of evil with unbelievers? Why?
6. This book repeatedly claims there are truths we can’t explain or prove to unbelievers—we just believe them. Discuss the difference between believing based on evidence and believing by faith and how both have a role. What have you believed due to evidence and what by faith alone?

CREATOR

1. This chapter says, “We Christians are unbelievers when it comes to competing stories of creation” (p. 40). It is an unusual way of thinking about Christians—as unbelievers. Discuss the similarities between the Christian unbeliever (regarding non-Christian or anti-Christian accounts of creation or other doctrines) and people Christians typically call unbelievers (those who don’t embrace the Christian faith). How are they similar and different?

2. The writer claims we can seldom convince those who are not Christians that God is the Creator, yet scientific research into the origins of matter and life is a worthy endeavor for Christians. Why?

3. If marshalling scientific data to prove God is Creator seldom convinces people with the opposite view, how are such people converted? What makes them want to become a Christian?

4. Describe both views of the activity of God in creation. Then find Scripture that seems to support either of these views. Which do you prefer? Why?

Note: The two views can be found on page 41 of the book. They are the “distant initiator” view and the “imminent creation-by-touch” view.

5. Discuss the role of each member of the Trinity in creation. How is this different from the non-orthodox notion that the Father created everything and the Son and Holy Spirit came later?

6. Discuss why most discussions of creation seem to dwell on a limited part of creation (humans or this planet). Work as a group to describe the entire scope and extent of creation (matter, the universe, seen, unseen, etc.).

7. Have any group members encountered the view of creation that says, “God is still creating even today”? Do you think this is a biblical view? Why or why not? What Scripture would you use to support your opinion?

8. Discuss this sentence: “How he created is interesting but is not relevant to our core faith” (p. 46).

9. In this chapter, the author is willing to let scientists offer up creation theories about the *how* and *when*, but insists Christians care most about *who* and *why*. What must any theory of creation include for Christians to be able to accept it?



JESUS CHRIST

1. What do Christians mean when they say that Jesus is God? What mistakes do we make in vocabulary that can lead to sub-Christian doctrine?

Note: One example is saying “God” when we mean “God the Father.”

2. Discuss how Christians might approach a friendly chat with a person who believes that Jesus was a good man and great prophet, but not God.

3. What significant meaning was pre-loaded into the Greek term *lord*, when it was applied to Jesus? How does this affect our discussion of who Jesus is?

4. Describe how Christianity might be different today if all Christians had agreed with the Arian view in AD 325.

5. Do you think God protected or the Spirit inspired this council in AD 325 to make the decision they did? To what extent does God guide and lead the church to make such decisions? Is the church always right in its decisions? Why or why not?

6. What is the difference between the use of “I believe” in the Apostle’s Creed (which was rooted in a personal baptismal confession) and the “we believe” of the Nicene Creed? What difference does it make today?

7. Why is it important theologically for Jesus to have been God “who came down for us and our salvation”? Why is it important practically?

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

1. Discuss this sentence: “Theology is not a product of arithmetic, as if we could find out which subjects are most important by adding up the number of verses that mention them” (p. 64). Though we might be tempted to do this, what important beliefs (besides the virgin birth) would be de-emphasized by using this method?

2. What role does each person of the Trinity play in the incarnation?

3. Discuss the practical implication of the statement: “We serve a God who makes impossibilities possible” (p. 67).

4. Make a chart of the mistakes that can be made about the two natures of Jesus. They are all mentioned in this chapter. Discuss each.

5. Christian orthodoxy claims Jesus was every bit as human as Peter or Paul. Why do we often prefer (as Zach does in the opening quote) to imagine Jesus pushed the “easy button” to overcome temptation, rather than beating temptation as a fully human being?

Note: One answer is that we might want to escape the idea that Jesus was fully human, so that we can justify our sinning by saying, “I’m only human.”

6. Make a chart of the people and beliefs in the early centuries that fell outside of Christian orthodoxy on the issue of Jesus’ humanity. How might these beyond-orthodox views sometimes appear today?

Note: These people and beliefs are listed on page 70 of the book.

THE SUFFERING, DEATH, AND BURIAL OF JESUS CHRIST

1. Where do both believers and unbelievers agree on this part of the creed? How do we differ on the meaning of this part of the creed?
2. Why do you think the creed leaves out all the teachings of Jesus and skips from his birth to his death? What does this say to us about the importance of using both the creeds and the Bible in our study?
3. What do history and theology teach us about the limitations of establishing “Muslim nations” or “Christian nations”? To what extent are we in the world and not of it? How has the view of a Christian’s role in nationalism changed through history and today?
4. Thomas Aquinas said that, on the cross, Jesus displayed all the virtues he taught. As a group, make a list of the virtues illustrated by Jesus in his death.
Note: The author’s list can be found on page 80 of the book.
5. How does it benefit us to know that Jesus truly died on the cross?
6. Discuss the original meaning of “descended into hell” and the later meaning that came to be associated with these original words. Read 1 Peter 3:19–20 and 4:6. Which interpretation do you prefer? Why?

THE RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF JESUS

1. In this chapter, the author discusses three views of the resurrection: two unbelieving and one believing; one held by people outside the church and two held by people inside the church. What do you think of the idea that there may be people in the church who are unbelievers in the bodily resurrection? What should the church's attitude be toward such unbelief?

2. Other than bodily resurrection, what are some other explanations that you've heard for the disappearance of the body of Jesus? Do you know anyone who believes one of these alternate views?

3. What is the difference between coming back to life, as Lazarus did, and resurrection?

4. Who raised Jesus—himself, the Father, the Spirit?

Note: You might invite the group to look up the Scripture passages found on page 91 of the book.

5. What practical meaning does the resurrection have for Christians? Why is the resurrection of Jesus important to us?

6. How can Christians believe yet not be able to understand, explain, or prove some Christian truths? Can you think of truths other than the resurrection that we believe yet struggle to understand, explain, or prove?

7. Read 1 Corinthians 15:13–19. What does it teach us about the meaning of the resurrection?

8. Why is it important for Christians to reject the theory of “spiritual resurrection,” where Jesus' spirit arose from the grave, but not his body? How does this relate to our own future and how we think about death?

9. We believe in the resurrection by faith, not because the evidence has made belief automatic. Yet, there is evidence for the resurrection. What is the evidence for Jesus' resurrection?

10. If there had been no ascension, how would our beliefs or doctrine be different?

11. What practical difference does it make for us today that Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father?



THE SECOND COMING AND JUDGMENT

1. Discuss the chapter's opening comment by Joel. How common is it for people, even among the church, to think like Joel? What makes people think this way? Why do you think we hear less about hell and judgment than we used to?
2. The book suggests that people often broaden the narrow path to make it wide enough to include their friends and relatives, while still narrowing it for others. Think about the funerals you've attended. How true is that statement in your experience?
3. When we broaden the path to include our relatives or friends who never claimed to believe, on what theological basis do we broaden the way? Is such broadening valid?
4. What is the difference between the second coming and the final judgment? Why do we tend to talk more about the second coming than the final judgment?
5. Scripture says that Jesus will act as the final Judge. How does this differ from popular thinking of who does the judging?
6. Who will be judged at the final judgment? How broad in scope is the final judgment?
7. What are some of the ways Christians over time have explained God's delay in bringing final judgment?
8. This book reminds Christians to focus on the "joy in judgment" (p. 113). Describe how this approach to judgment can change a fearsome cringing into a joyful anticipation of judgment.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. What is the trouble with Kurt's view in the chapter's opening quote?
2. Why do you think people are nervous to talk about the Holy Spirit's work in their lives?
3. Is anyone in the group familiar with oneness or Jesus-only theology? What does this theology teach about the Trinity? How does it compare with what Scripture teaches?

Note: If you are unfamiliar with oneness theology, learn more by researching the term before the group meets.

4. If all three members of the Trinity are God, then is it OK to pray to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, just like we pray to the Father? How can we pray appropriately, using a full Trinitarian approach?

5. List a dozen worship songs used frequently in your church. Then organize them into four categories: worship of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. What do you learn by doing this?

6. Note: This is an activity rather than a discussion question. Be sure to allow plenty of time. Display or hand out to the group a list of the different kinds of work the Holy Spirit does. These are found on pages 123–127 of the book. Then invite people to give a personal testimony of how the Spirit has worked in their lives in one of these ways. Let this be a spiritually refreshing time of testimony more than a cerebral discussion of ideas. Use this time to glorify God the Holy Spirit and praise God for his work through the Spirit.

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

1. Read Brian and Kevin's opening remarks at the beginning of the chapter. Do you know anyone who has completely dropped out of assembling with other Christians and professes to practice private or solo Christianity? Without judging or breaking confidences, share what you know of their experiences.

2. In what ways are all Christians everywhere one?

3. How can we honestly say the church is holy? Is it misleading to say this?

4. What is the difference between *catholic* and *Catholic*. What does the creed mean by *catholic*? What does it not mean?

5. What does the Nicene Creed mean by its use of the word *apostolic*? What do we mean by this term when we apply it to the local church?

6. The book says the following: "The church is not two people who play golf on Sunday mornings and merely claim to be Christians. The church is the physical gathering of Christ's followers" (p. 138). If the church is the gathering or assembly of Christians, when does the church exist? When can it not exist?

7. Can you think of any long-term, solo Christians in the New Testament? How long can a person who comes to faith in Christ apart from the organized church remain a Christian while shunning the fellowship and community of other Christians?

Note: There is no right answer to this question, but wrestling with it can be enlightening.

8. While our church buildings will pass away, what will happen to the church after the end of time?

9. How has the church been a blessing to you? Share your thoughts and testimonies. Express praise and gratitude to God for his creation of the body of Christ.

10. Imagine what your life would be like if you had not had a church. What would be missing if there had been no church throughout history? What would a church-less Christianity look like?

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

1. Look again at the quote from Kaila at the beginning of the chapter. The book makes the statement, “Kaila cannot be forgiven, for she confesses no sin” (p. 145). Is it important for people to agree that they are sinners even if they don’t really believe they’ve ever sinned? How will Kaila ever come to accept her sin? Or are there people who have never sinned and who need no forgiveness? Can one be a sinner without ever sinning?

2. How do modern people tend to dismiss or diminish their own culpability for sin? What about our culture encourages this approach? Can you think of anyone in the Gospels who wouldn’t admit their own sin? How did Jesus deal with this issue?

Note: The rich young ruler is one example.

3. What is the difference between sin as an *act* and sin as a *state*?

4. If we see sin as primarily a broken relationship and not just a violation of a law, how does this affect our view of sin?

5. Can you think of a case where one might be forgiven without personal repentance? What is your view of babies who die in infancy?

6. What is the role of baptism in the Christian life? How is baptism related to the altar call? How have Christian views of baptism changed since the early church?

Note: See pages 151–153 in the book.

7. In what ways does the church have the “keys of the kingdom” in enabling forgiveness of sins to happen? The book says, “The keys to the kingdom are the ordinary activities of the church” (p. 156). What does this mean? Give examples of how we can lock up the kingdom to others in the church.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

1. Look at Cassie's view of death and heaven at the beginning of the chapter. She talks about a soul that leaves the body to go to a body-less "spiritual" heaven, while the body decays forever in the ground. Is this sub-Christian view of the afterlife common among Christians today?

Note: Be careful at this stage of criticizing people who believe this way; the rest of the lesson will do the gentle correcting.

2. The chapter claims that this classic Christian doctrine "inspires more unbelief among today's church attendees than any other statement in the creed" (p. 161). Why do you think it is that many Christians today do not believe in the bodily resurrection? How free are today's Christians to discard doctrines the church has believed for several thousand years?

3. Why is it so easy to disbelieve the doctrine of bodily resurrection? Why is it hard to adequately explain and defend this doctrine?

4. What are some of the recent human scientific advances that seem to offer a fresh perspective on the resurrection of the body?

Note: See page 164 in the book.

5. What do you believe happens in the meantime between our death and resurrection?

Note: List the orthodox options. Conclude with this statement from the book: "Whatever we envision as the intermediate state between death and final resurrection, a Christian doctrine always ends with a real resurrection of a real body" (p. 166).

6. What are the risks of discarding the doctrine of the resurrection of the body?

Note: See page 167 in the book. Consider a brief study of 1 Corinthians 15 at this point.

7. What is the Christian view on who will be resurrected?

8. How might our resurrected bodies be similar to and different from our present bodies? What can we learn based on Christ's resurrected body?

9. How does a firm belief in the resurrection of the body change how we live practically each day?

THE LIFE EVERLASTING

1. Why would Christians who have it pretty good in the here and now spend little time thinking about heaven?

2. How would you answer the opening question on page 176: “Why is it that many Christians today have such contempt for otherworldliness?”

3. Do you think that we will know one another in heaven? Use Matthew 22:20 and other verses cited on pages 178–179 of the book to discuss this question.

4. How common do you think is Kenny’s view of heaven as a privatized cubicle of his dreams (see opening quote of chapter)? How is this different from the view presented of heaven as a communal experience? Which is more appealing to you?

5. What do you see as the connection between the holy catholic church and everlasting life?

Note: The book makes the point that “the church is going to heaven” (p. 135), and that our life in the church on earth is preparation for a life with people in heaven.

6. What do you think about the idea presented in the chapter of heaven as the goal of life rather than a reward or consolation prize after real life is over? How would living by this classic understanding of everlasting life make a difference in our lives? What dangers or challenges might there be with this perspective?

7. Is it possible for an inaccurate thought about heaven (fishing in a stream, backpacking without pain, etc.) to actually portray something true about heaven? What thoughts or dreams have you had about heaven that might not be accurate, but could teach us something that is true about heaven?

8. Who do you look forward to meeting or seeing again in heaven? How does it make you feel to think about seeing these people? What questions do you hope to have answered in heaven? What would you like to say to Jesus Christ when you meet him face-to-face?