

The Ideal Congregation

In the Light of Holy Scripture

A Bible Study Course for Adults

by

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Leader's Guide

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To the Leader

The purpose of this course is to lead Christians to think about their congregation in the light of God's Word. The concept of *ideal* is central to this course. No congregation has completely arrived at God's ideal, but every congregation should be striving toward it.

Each lesson presents one area of congregational life. There will be many issues the class members may want to explore. The leader should take care to keep the lesson moving. Some of the discussion may indicate the need for a more thorough study of the issue at a future time.

Classes should focus on the positive. Some questions are designed to help the congregation think about its weaknesses, but most are designed to focus on where the Lord wants the congregation to go.

Each lesson contains an introduction and one or more main points. The leader may want to read the introduction or have one of the class members read it. Each of the main points of the lesson is followed by one or more questions. Passages are placed before the questions so the class focuses on the meaning of the passages and not just on how they answer the questions. After the passages are read and the questions asked, the leader can go back to the passages and explore how they answer the questions.

We have attempted to create a balance between offering only passage references and supplying the entire texts of passages. Looking up every passage can become tedious, while reading them all from student's guides doesn't allow students to dig into their Bibles. This format attempts to strike a balance. Also, not having more than one passage to look up before each question allows class members to keep their Bibles open and view all the passages as a unit.

May these lessons be a blessing to you and your class members.

The Editor

Lesson 1 The Church Is God's Garden

Introduction

What is the church? The church is the gathering of all believers in Christ around the means of grace—the gospel in Word and sacrament. It is made up of people who have been made holy through the blood of Christ and have become his followers.

Although the entire fellowship of believers (the communion of saints) can be seen only by God, Christians make themselves visible to those around them. They publicly confess their faith through creeds; they join together in assemblies, also called churches. These visible gatherings of Christians take the form of congregations and may organize into larger groups called synods or denominations.

The Bible uses a variety of word pictures to describe the holy Christian church. One of these pictures is a garden, planted and watered by God himself. On the wasteland of man's sin and spiritual drought, God created a garden. He guards, protects, and waters it so that it grows and produces fruit.

God created his garden out of a wasteland.

- List some differences between a garden and a wasteland.

Answers will vary. A garden is alive, green, beautiful, productive, new. A wasteland is dead, brown, ugly, barren, old.

Genesis 3:15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

- When did God begin to grow his garden, the church?

God began to grow his garden (create his church) when Adam and Eve first heard the gospel after the fall and became righteous through faith in it.

Key Passage: Read Isaiah 55:10-13.

- How does God grow his garden?

The Word of God accomplishes God's purpose for sending it: creating believers in Christ who together make up his church.

Isaiah 43:19-21 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

- These verses speak about God's deliverance of Judah from captivity in Babylon. They picture God's grace to Israel and also to each member of his church in the New Testament. Describe the differences between a person who rejects God's grace and one whose heart the Lord has opened to receive his grace.

Many answers are possible. The Christian knows the true God, trusts God and his Word, is beautifully dressed in Christ's holiness through faith, lives for God. A non-Christian does not know the true God, trusts in other things, has not put on Christ's righteousness through faith, lives for self.

God guards and protects his garden.

Psalms 125:1,2 Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.

John 8:31,32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

- How does the Lord free his disciples from fear of the forces of evil?

The psalmist promises that the Lord will surround his church throughout time and eternity. Jerusalem is a symbol for all believers. In John's gospel Jesus tells us that his Word is God's truth, which preserves and delivers his disciples.

Key Passage: Read Matthew 16:16-19.

- What does Jesus mean by "the gates of Hades"?

Whatever comes from Satan and his plans to eliminate the gospel, such as attempts to discredit God's Word, to lead people into sin, and to destroy faith.

- What is the "rock" on which Christ's church stands firm against its enemies?

The rock is Jesus Christ, whom Peter confesses as his Savior. Peter's name means "a stone" while the rock Jesus speaks about means "a stone formation." The rock of Peter's confession forms the foundation of Jesus' church, and his confession is that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

- Does God's protection extend over every visible church?

God protects every child of God. Since every visible Christian church, by definition, contains God's children, God protects the visible congregation in which they worship. He also protects visible churches so they can serve his purposes of getting the Word

out into the world. God protects visible churches from error by means of the Word. If they reject the Word, they separate themselves from Christ and become the source of their own downfall. If by God's grace they remain in his Word, God blesses their work and protects them from whatever may hinder their work, until, of course, their work is complete.

God continues to water his garden so it grows and produces fruit.

***Matthew 28:16-20** Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

***Acts 2:38-41** Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

- How reasonable is it to expect that God will continue to water the church so that it grows and produces fruit? (This refers to me, my congregation, the synod, home and world missions.)

Matthew 28:16-20—Jesus commissions his disciples to take the Word and sacrament out into the world as the means to bring others to himself. If he gave that command, we can expect him to bless his Word as he wills.

Acts 2:38-41—God has blessed his Word and the Sacrament of Baptism. The Lord caused his garden to suddenly expand on Pentecost. What God did in the past, he does today at the time and in the place he chooses.

Key Passages: Read Psalm 1:1-3 and John 15:5-8.

- How important is it for us to depend on the Lord to grant what he has led us to expect?

It is vital that we depend on the Lord to fulfill his promises.

Psalm 1:1-3—The "law of the LORD," that is, God's Word, firmly plants us in Christ and causes us to bear fruits of faith. We flourish only as we receive the gospel in Word and sacrament.