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Third Edition

WHAT WE BELIEVE

LEADER'S GUIDE

LEW VANDER MEER


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LEW VANDER MEER


**FAITH
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Christian Resources

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the leader's guide to Part One (sessions 1-12) of a twenty-four session video course titled *What We Believe*.

When we first produced *What We Believe* back in 1988, we thought it would serve the churches well for perhaps five years. To our delight, demand for the course far surpassed our predictions and remains strong today. Thousands of students and many leaders have watched the video and used these materials to learn or review the basics of our Reformed faith.

For the third edition of *What We Believe*, we have decided to retain the classic video lessons filmed with Rev. Lew Vander Meer in 2000. We feel that these lessons continue to effectively capture both the session material and Pastor Lew's endearing teaching style—two aspects of the course that have made the series so popular over the past twenty-five years.

We have, however, done a few things to help move Pastor Lew along into the second decade of the 21st century. The teaching sessions have received a digital makeover as we made the transition from VHS format to DVD. On-screen graphics, as well as the leader and session guides, now reflect the 2011 Reformed Confessions Translations. Some of the content in the leader and session guides has received a slight makeover to bring it up-to-date, but we have left most things as they were.

FORMAT AND AUDIENCE

This twenty-four-session course teaches teens in grades nine through twelve the basics of the Christian faith according to the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition. Although this is not a course on the Belgic Confession, the sessions basically follow its sequence and frequently refer to its articles. If the Belgic is not part of your confessional tradition, you can omit referring to it during the discussion part of the course.

Each session in this course features a twenty-minute video presentation by Rev. Lew Vander Meer, a veteran high school Bible teacher and pastor. After each video presentation, students use a handout to review key facts, discuss issues raised by the video, and apply the teachings to their lives.

What We Believe may be adapted to various patterns of use. For example, some groups might want to use all twenty-four sessions in sequence in a single year; others may prefer to use twelve sessions one year and twelve the following year; still others might take a breather after a dozen sessions, study some other nondoctrinal material for a few weeks, and then return to study the remaining twelve sessions. Feel free to adjust your own use of these materials to your schedule and to the reactions you hear from your students.

GOALS OF THE COURSE

What We Believe is designed to

- encourage young people to make a commitment to Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.
- help young people understand the systematic structure of Reformed doctrine and enable them

to acquire and use a basic “faith vocabulary” common to the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition.

- help young people appreciate the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition of Christianity in comparison with other traditions.
- enable teens to see a clear connection between doctrine and life and to respond positively to the teachings of the church.

SESSION GUIDES

For each of the two parts of *What We Believe*, we’ve written a companion session guide for your students to use. Entire session guides can be handed out to your group, or you can choose to tear individual session worksheets from the perforated booklet and distribute them to the students at the beginning of each session before the video segment is shown. After each session, encourage your students to save their session guides as a summary of the main teachings of the church (you may want to provide a two-pocket folder as something of an incentive for doing so). No homework is required or suggested for this course.

Beginning with session 2, each session guide includes a review quiz designed to help students recall key ideas from previous sessions. The quizzes focus primarily on the previous week’s video but also include questions on earlier sessions. Answers to these review quizzes are given in this leader’s guide.

Session guides also include a space for answers to the Bible Trivia questions Pastor Lew asks on the video (evaluations of the original course show that students really enjoyed these questions). Your students can check their own answers against those given by Pastor Lew at the end of each video presentation.

The section called “Video Discussion Guide” offers questions and other activities that review key facts from the video, raise issues for discussion, and draw practical applications. You will need to determine how many of these questions you can handle in your

allotted time. We encourage you to supplement (or occasionally replace) our questions with your own or those of your students. We wanted to provide leaders with plenty of options based on their own individual group dynamics, so feel free to adjust and use whatever is most useful from the guides for your particular situation.

You may want to provide copies of the Belgic Confession for your group; the video refers to and quotes from specific articles of this confession. You should be aware that while the text on-screen and in the leader and session guides has been updated to reflect the 2011 translation of the Reformed confessions, Pastor Lew still quotes from a previously approved version in the video. If you plan to incorporate these references into your discussions of the video, it would be helpful to have at least one copy of the latest translation for every two students. You can find copies available for free download at http://www.crcna.org/pages/belgic_confess_main.cfm. It is also available in booklet form from Faith Alive Christian Resources.

If your denomination does not use the Belgic Confession, you may, of course, choose not to discuss it during your class sessions. Most of the print references in the leader’s guide to the Belgic Confession are by way of options that you may decide not to use.

LEADER’S MATERIALS

To lead Part Two of this course, you will need the *What We Believe*, Third Edition Part 1 DVD. For each session, you also may want to have a chalk- or whiteboard available for use during your discussions. Some of the suggested student activities will require a supply of pens and paper or markers and newsprint/posterboard. Make sure as you prepare for your session that you make note of any optional materials you may need based on which activities you choose to do.

One of the advantages of a video course is that a trained teacher and theologian “comes into” your

classroom each week. Pastor Lew presents Christian doctrine in a way that's both clear and appealing to young people. Despite the fact that over a decade has passed since we filmed these sessions, we think Pastor Lew's unique personality and style resonates and entertains as much today as it has in the past.

Each video presentation is about twenty minutes long (if at all possible, watch the video presentations at home before viewing them with your class). After the video, we suggest allowing at least another thirty minutes for the review quiz and discussion of the topics covered in the video. An hour for the entire session would be ideal.

Discussing the video is a crucial part of this course. It gives the students a chance to interact with a knowledgeable leader, to clarify information, to discuss issues, to ask their own questions, and to draw personal applications. You don't need to be a theologian or a professional teacher to lead the discussion, but you do need to be a committed Christian who enjoys young people and who understands what the Bible and the church teach. You may find yourself learning from and reacting to Pastor Lew's teaching right along with the students, which is great!

This leader's guide will help you through the class sessions by providing Scripture and Belgic Confession references, as well as a statement of purpose that summarizes the video and gives you general and specific goals for that particular session.

Included for each lesson is a Perspective section offering additional biblical, historical, and theological insights into the content of the session. Dr. M. Eugene Osterhaven, a retired professor of systematic theology at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, wrote these excellent backgrounds for the original course, and we have retained them here for your use (Robert DeMoor wrote the background for session 16). We suggest you read and reflect on this section in your preparations. Don't feel as though you have to be prepared to recite this information back to the

students word-for-word; it is provided to give you a bit of theological background you may need in your discussions.

The Procedure section provides step-by-step directions for achieving the session's purpose. In it you will find answers to the review quizzes, a guide to presenting each video (we suggest stopping some videos at various points for discussion), and answers to the questions asked in the student session guides. Suggestions for group work, discussion of case studies, personal application, and other learning activities are included as well. The Closing section of each session presents a variety of group and personal worship options.

VARIETY

Perhaps you're wondering whether twelve (or more) video presentations and discussions will have enough variety to hold the interest of active young people.

As we mentioned earlier, you needn't go through all twenty-four sessions in sequence. Any format gets boring if overworked. And, of course, some students and some entire groups may simply tune out on the video for a variety of reasons. However, our experience with previous editions of *What We Believe* strongly suggests that the course not only works, but works well.

Remember that the videos are only about twenty minutes long, feature a gifted communicator, and are directed especially to young people. Following the video, your own discussion time can be lively and varied. Notice too that the questions go beyond facts. We've provided lots of options for case studies, group work, and a variety of opportunities for personal application that should help hold the group's interest. We've also included creative activities that take you beyond the basic questions in the session guide.

As a leader, you can use your own creative approaches to inject still more variety into the sessions. Here are a few ideas:

- Prepare and deliver your own lecture to the class to help the students discover the main idea directly from Scripture and the Belgic Confession.
- Have students compete in teams on the review quiz and the Bible Trivia. Use small groups to work on the questions.
- Ask a pair of students to prepare for and lead the class discussion for a session.
- Appoint pairs of students to design the concluding worship activities.
- Invite a guest speaker into your classroom.
- Take a field trip to a neighboring church that's markedly different from your own.

HOME CLASSROOMS

If it's practical, try meeting with your students in your home. Young people are more likely to be relaxed and open when gathered around a television set in your family room than when seated in rows of folding chairs in church. You can ask students to take turns bringing refreshments.

Teaching in your home does cut down maximum class size to perhaps a dozen or fewer, but a small group is great for interacting and really getting to know each other.

We welcome your comments on this course. Please contact us at 1-800-333-8300 or email us at editors@faithaliveresources.org. Thank you!

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 8; Psalm 19:1-4;
Romans 1:19-20

BELGIC CONFESSION

Article 2

WHAT WE BELIEVE SESSION 1

REVELATION AND RELIGION

PURPOSE

In his first video presentation of *What We Believe*, Part One, Pastor Lew introduces himself and the course and explains the circumstances that motivated Guido de Brès to write the Belgic Confession. After asking today's Bible Trivia questions, Pastor Lew defines revelation and religion. General revelation, he says, has three parts: nature, history, and conscience. The video concludes with the answers to the Bible trivia questions.

After today's session, students should be more aware of how God reveals himself to them personally through general revelation. They should be able to name the author of the Belgic Confession and explain the context in which it was written. They should be able to define revelation, religion, and general revelation, giving examples of what they have personally learned about God through nature, history, and conscience.

PERSPECTIVE

This session begins a two-part, twenty-four-session study of Reformed doctrine, or—as it is more commonly called in the churches—catechism. Instead of the experience-based, sin-salvation-service order of doctrines that we find in the Heidelberg Catechism, this course follows the more intellectual order of the Belgic Confession.

We begin, therefore, not with “What is your only comfort?” but with “The means by which we know God” (the caption of Article 2).

As Pastor Lew points out in the video, there are two such means: creation and the Bible. These are often referred to as general and special revelation. General revelation includes nature, history, and conscience; special revelation is God's self-disclosure to Israel under the old covenant and to the early church under the new form and meaning of the covenant in Jesus Christ. This week's session concentrates on general revelation and the phenomenon of religion that results from it.

In contrast to the common idea—one with which your students would probably agree—that some people are religious while others are not, this session teaches that all people are religious by nature. As Calvin says, if people do not know the true God, rather than having no god at all they will make one for themselves. This common religious bent is, from a Reformed perspective, a very important teaching that surfaces again in our ideas of sin, human responsibility, and faith.

Why are all people religious? Because God manifests himself to everyone “daily in the formation of every part of the world, and daily presents himself to public view in such a way that men cannot open their eyes without having to behold him” (John

Calvin, *Institutes*, 1, 5, 1). To Calvin, the universe is a gigantic mirror in which we see God. Before reminding his readers that it is dangerous to confuse God with his works, he even suggests that a pious soul could call nature God (*Institutes*, 1, 5, 5). As the psalmist puts it, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1).

Besides the voice of creation, there is also the voice of our conscience. One chapter of Calvin’s *Institutes* is titled “The Human Mind Naturally Endued with the Knowledge of God.” Rather than a small, sharp voice that warns us when we err, our conscience should be understood as an inner knowledge or awareness of God, blurred by sin, that witnesses to us of God (Acts 14:17; Rom. 7:22) and leaves us “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Because God continues to be in dynamic rapport with his creation (and with us, God’s creatures) and because God gives us the capacity to receive his message, none of us can plead innocence, for we all witness something of God’s glory.

How history reveals God may be harder to explain to your students. They may think of history as an objective record without any moral element. You might raise the question of whether, looking back, we can see something of God’s judgment in, say, the defeat of Nazi Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the downfall of other dictatorial or terrorist regimes around the world. The Scripture is as certain about God’s judgment in history as it is about God’s mercy. In both, God reveals himself to all people.

The danger that arises when dealing with general revelation is that an overemphasis on its abilities may lead to the development of what is called an independent natural theology. Such a natural theology proposes that we can come to know God in a redemptive way through general revelation *without* the need for God’s special revelation. However, we believe that nature and human reason alone are never enough. These natural things may point us in

the right direction, but our redemption comes from God’s special and supernatural revelation alone.

John Calvin makes a helpful distinction between general revelation and our ability to appreciate it: “The demonstration of God, whereby he makes his glory apparent in his creatures, is clear enough with respect to its own brightness; but with respect to our blindness, it is not sufficient” (*Commentary on Romans*, 1:20). Human beings are incurably religious, but they are also incurably rebellious.

Looking forward to the next session, recognize that Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, in presenting general and special revelation as parallel sources of our knowledge of God, leaves an unanswered question: Are these two sources independent of each other? How are they interrelated? In the phrases “to us” and “before our eyes,” the confession points to an answer. The Bible speaks to us believers as we stand in nature, conscience, and general history. And natural revelation is seen by eyes that have been enlightened by special revelation. These two sources are not side-by-side but interdependent.

PROCEDURE

Video Presentation

To get things started on a friendly note, provide some cookies and pop or other refreshments for your students to enjoy. That way you can chat with them as they arrive and they’ll have something to do before class begins.

You really don’t need to say much by way of introducing this course, since Pastor Lew does that on today’s video. Do explain, though, that the videos are only part of each session (about twenty minutes)—talking about the video and the ideas it sparks is really the most important part of the course. And let the students catch something of your own enthusiasm about reviewing the basics of what we believe. There is important content to cover, but we will have fun along the way!

Hand out the first session guide and pens. Ask everyone to watch for the definitions of the words (highlighted in captions on the video) listed at question 1 under the heading “Video Discussion Guide.” Students can jot these down as they have time. We’ll be going over these definitions later, so it doesn’t matter if students get everything down word-for-word.

Show the video nonstop. Ask everyone to write Bible Trivia answers in their session guides (Pastor Lew gives answers to these at the end of the video).

Video Discussion Guide

Use this section of the session guide to help you discuss the video, raise related issues, and apply the session. Encourage students to jot answers and notes on their session guides.

Here are the questions (repeated in **bold** from the session guide) and suggested answers:

1. Briefly define the following terms:

- a) **Belgic Confession:** A confession of faith written by Guido de Brès in 1561. It is called the Belgic Confession because it was written in what we today call Belgium. It was written to prove to those persecuting the church that those of the Reformed faith professed the truth of Scripture.

TIP

This is not a course on the Belgic Confession, but we will be referring to specific articles from the confession during most sessions. While the video does display quoted sections from the confession, you may also want to provide your students with copies of this historic confession. If the Belgic Confession is not one of the standards of your church, you can choose not to discuss it during your sessions. If you are going to use the Belgic, you might read its introduction.

TIP

In 2011 updated translations of three Reformed confessions (the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Contemporary Testimony) were released. While Pastor Lew will be quoting from the older version of the Belgic Confession on the video lessons, we have adjusted all the written references (on-screen and on-paper) to reflect the approved 2011 translation. Later on in Session 22 you will explore why, as “reforming” people, we make changes such as this, but now may be a good time to point out to your students that we work together to evaluate our practices and make changes when we feel we may not be in line with the teachings of the Bible. For more information on the changes in the 2011 translations of the Reformed confessions, visit http://www.crcna.org/pages/beliefs_2011confessions.cfm or talk with your pastor.

- b) **revelation:** God showing or displaying himself to humanity. God communicates knowledge of himself to us so that we may know him, love him, worship him, and serve him (Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*).
- c) **religion:** our response to God’s revelation. Note that true religion is receiving a correct revelation from God and then responding properly to that revelation.
- d) **general revelation:** God showing or displaying himself in a nonredemptive (nonsaving) way to all people through nature, history, and conscience.

2. Why is knowing the basic facts about what we believe just as important as having the right feelings or commitment?

As Pastor Lew says, if we don’t have the right facts, facts drawn from the Bible, then we don’t have the basis for making a commitment, and we will be unable to explain our commitment to others in a way that makes sense to them.

OPTION

Ask the group if their own religious background and training placed a greater emphasis on facts (“head”) or on feelings/commitment (“heart”). Which of the two emphases do they think is most needed in the church today?

3. **General revelation in nature: You are outdoors in the mountains, looking at a sky full of brilliant stars. Or you are taking a hike through an autumn forest. Or you are watching a thunderstorm roar in over a lake. Think about a personal encounter with God’s world that impressed you. What did it show you about God?**

Ask for volunteers to give examples of an encounter with God’s world that impressed them with God’s greatness and goodness; God’s sense of order and detail, God’s majesty and beauty, creative power, provision, and so on. Note how Article 2 of the Belgic Confession says that the universe is “like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity.” You may want the class to read from Psalm 19:1-4 or Psalm 8, either now or at the close of the session.

4. **General revelation in history: Think of a recent event in your nation’s history or your personal history. What did that event show you about God?**

Certainly we learn about God and our relationship with God through our corporate and individual histories. Challenge your students to think about major events or memorable moments in their lives and as a group discuss what God may have been revealing through those events. Guide the discussion so that the students come to see God in both the exciting and celebratory things that happen to us, as well as the tragic and confusing. This can sometimes be difficult

for students to discern, so be sure to allow some extra time as needed. If possible take some time in advance to examine recent newsworthy events to discuss and look for ways to draw out how God reveals aspects of his faithfulness, justice, love, and mercy through them.

TIP

You’ll want to caution your young people that we are not always able to understand just what God is teaching us by world events or by events in our own lives. Sometimes it takes years before God’s intentions are clear. Sometimes we never find out for sure.

5. **General revelation in conscience: Suppose you hurt someone at school by insulting her in front of her friends. That night you can’t get to sleep. You begin to regret deeply what you did. How has God used your conscience to reveal himself? What has been revealed?**

In this case, God spoke through the conscience to create a sense of restlessness and guilt. By so doing, God revealed his desire for mercy and kindness in our lives.

OPTION

Ask your class if they think all people are created with a conscience, a sense of right and wrong, good and bad. If so, why don’t they behave in right ways toward God? (Because sin has muted or silenced their conscience.) Talk about the extent to which believers should rely on that small “inner voice.”

6. **General revelation is nonredemptive, says Pastor Lew. It can’t save us. Why not?**

It’s not hard to think of reasons why general revelation alone can’t save us, though it can lead us to God by showing us something of his goodness and might. Sin has dulled both general revelation itself and our perception of it. More

important, general revelation does not show us Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. Special revelation is needed to save sinners.

- 7. Imagine an isolated tribe in the dense tropical rainforests of Brazil. Untouched by civilization, members of this tribe have never heard the gospel. Yet they live by a strict moral code: People who are caught stealing have their hand cut off. Capital punishment is the penalty for murder. The tribe worships the sun, trusting it to provide them with food, prosperity, and long life.**

Where do you think this tribe got its sense of morality and its sense of the divine? Is this tribe religious?

Can this tribe give the excuse that it has not been introduced to the one true God? Why or why not? What do Romans 1:19-20 and Article 2 of the Belgic Confession say about this?

May we say with finality that this tribe is not saved? Why or why not? What implications does this suggest for mission work?

This case study should make for some interesting discussion that can serve as a good summary of the session so far.

Where did the tribe get its sense of morality and of the divine? Mainly from close observation of nature, but perhaps also from the way their basic needs were met, and certainly from that inborn sense of the divine that all people have. The tribe is “religious” because its members have responded to God’s general revelation by developing a strict moral code and by worshipping the sun as their deity.

Can this tribe give the excuse that they have never been introduced to the one true God? Let the class give their opinions. Some students will wonder how the tribe can possibly be held responsible for failing to recognize the one true God from general revelation. Then read Article 2 of the Belgic Confession and Romans 1:19-20.

Both speak of humanity being “without excuse” because of general revelation.

Of course we may not judge who will and who will not be saved in the end. That is up to God to decide. But as we understand the Bible, we believe that the only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Our task is to do all we can to bring the good news of Jesus to all people everywhere.

Closing

One way to conclude today’s session is to read Psalm 8 or Psalm 19:1-4 responsively as a prayer of praise. Or invite students to finish the following prayer starter:

O God, you are . . .

OPTION

If you have time, give students several minutes to write their own version of Psalm 8:1; then read the prayers for your closing devotion.

Available for the first time on DVD, this popular high school course covers key aspects of the Reformed faith and worldview in an easy-to-lead format. Based on the Belgic Confession, each session features a classic twenty-minute video lesson by pastor and teacher Lew Vander Meer. After watching the video, students use session guides to review, discuss, and apply the teachings to their lives. Leader guides provide helpful backgrounds and offer options and tips for leading student activities.

Updated to include the 2011 translations of the Reformed confessions, this course will help teens

- make or renew a commitment to Christ as their personal Savior and Lord.
- understand the structure and distinctiveness of Reformed doctrine.
- acquire and use a basic “faith vocabulary” common to the Reformed tradition.
- see a clear connection between doctrine and life.
- respond positively to the teachings of the church.

Rev. Lew Vander Meer is a gifted communicator who knows how to teach doctrine to teens in a way they find interesting and memorable. He is a veteran Bible teacher, and he also serves as senior pastor of a congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



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