

STUDY GUIDE FOR THE UNDERGROUND CHURCH

Prologue: *Empty Sermons, Empty Pews*:

- 1) The author begins with the statement: "First the bad news: the church of Jesus Christ in the Western world is in terrible shape." He then goes on to describe the malaise that hangs over much organized religion in the West. Do you agree with his assessment?
 - 2) This "bad news" (the church is in terrible shape) is then referred to as the "good news." Why does the author consider it good news?
 - 3) What is the "dirty little secret" that the author believes hangs over the sanctuary? What does Fred Craddock mean when he says that the greatest sin of the church may be the sin of "silliness?"
 - 4) The author talks about an experience while attending a meeting of the Academy of Homiletics. What do you think is the point of that story?
 - 5) The author claims that what is destroying the church is lack of *trust*. What does he mean by this? If you agree, can you give your own examples of why trust is so important in religion?
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Chapter One: *Sweet Jesus, Talking His Melancholy Madness*:

- 1) The author begins by asking whether anyone today might consider Jesus of Nazareth to be mad, or crazy, or even mentally ill? What evidence is there to suggest that his contemporaries thought so, and what does this mean for us today?
- 2) Why does the author believe that poets have much to teach us about doing theology?
- 3) What did the strange metaphor of the piñata have to do with understanding the Bible or the life of the spirit?
- 4) Much of this chapter is built around an explication of the poem, "Maybe" by Mary Oliver. Do you agree with the author's interpretation? Do you have a different take on that poem?

- 5) The author claims that the search for the “historical” Jesus has run its course, and another search must now commence. What is that new “search” about, and why is it important?
- 6) In explaining the different ways that liberals and conservatives explain the meaning of the story of Jesus calming the waters, the author argues that we find what we go looking for in scripture. This leads to a great divide in the church: *conservatives confuse certainty with faith, whereas liberals insist that knowledge alone is redemptive*. Discuss.
- 7) The author relates a story about asking his congregation once to imagine that Jesus snored. Why is that a difficult thing to imagine? What else is difficult to imagine when it comes to the humanity of Jesus?
- 8) What made people think Jesus might be crazy (*existemi*—literally beside himself or insane and witless)?
- 9) Why did so many Psychiatrists of the late 19th and early 20th century seek to explain Jesus as suffering from mental illness?
- 10) What does Thomas Merton’s critique of “sanity” and “insanity” have to do with Jesus? Would true disciples of Jesus today be considered “certifiably insane?”

Chapter 2

The Early Church That Never Was:

- 1) This chapter begins with a list of common the ten most common mistakes about the content of the Bible. What does this mean for American society and why are the stakes so high?
- 2) Why does the author say that we are obsessed with the “early church”?
- 3) What does the author mean when he uses the phrase, “The Way It Wasn’t”?
- 4) What mistake does the author say has been made about the meaning of the book of Revelation?
- 5) Why does the author believe that the Underground Railroad movement makes a good model for the church of the future?
- 6) What is the difference between reading church history as written by theologians, and church history as a “people’s movement?”

- 7) What does the author mean when he says, “You *Can* ‘Go Home Again.’? How did the discovery of ancient manuscripts at Nag Hammadi “explode a bombshell in early Christian studies”?
- 8) What are the four developments that exposed myths about our understanding of early Christianity?
- 9) Why is the marriage of the church to the Roman Empire a warning to the church today?
- 10) What does the author mean by the phrase “The Great Reversal” and what are some examples of this paradox today?

Chapter 3

Waking Up in Bed with Constantine:

- 1) What is the meaning of the opening lines of poetry from William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*?
 - 2) In what ways does the author contend that Constantine ruined Christianity by setting the stage for its eventual adoption as the official church of the Roman Empire?
 - 3) Why do liberals and conservatives see this “marriage” to Rome differently?
 - 4) Why does the author call the Holy Spirit “the most dangerous leg of the trinity”?
 - 5) Why is Pentecostalism the fastest growing form of religion in the global south?
 - 6) Did Constantine really take Christianity seriously, or was he just a shrewd politician?
 - 7) Harvey Cox calls the post-Constantine age the “Age of Belief.” But the author calls it’s the “Age of Pretending.” Why?
 - 8) The author claims that while our Empire burns, the church is fiddling. What does he mean, and can you give examples?
 - 9) What does the author mean when he writes that we do not just live in an Empire, but *the Empire lives in us*?
 - 10) Why is the gospel that was once called, “The Great Offensive” no longer offensive?
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Chapter 4:
Onward Christian Soldiers?

1. The author seems amazed and saddened that in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, American Christians were the least likely to oppose the war and the most likely to support it. Why?
2. Does the idea of “just war” make sense? What was the Catholic Church trying to do when it set out rules for a “just” or “moral” war?
3. The author states that the only hope for the church is for the body of Christ to recognize that it is not the Empire at worship. It is not the Republican or Democratic Party at worship. So what is it? And what is its proper relationship to the dominate culture?
4. The author hates the idea of the American flag in the sanctuary (though most churches do display it there). What is his objection? How could churches handle this dilemma?
5. We hear much discussion of the role of politics in the pulpit. Many suggest that church should be entirely non-political or a-political. Is this possible?
6. When John Dominic Crossan uses the example of Jesus telling Pilate in John’s gospel that, “My kingdom is not of this world,” what does Crossan believe that Jesus means? What do people often mean when they use that phrase today?
7. The author suggests that the dominate theology of the blood atonement actually encourages or sanctifies violence. How so?
8. Have someone in the class read Dawkins’ rant against religion aloud. Do you agree with his argument? Why does the author take exception to his rhetoric?
9. Did God “evolve” in the Bible? What are the implications of making this claim? What are the dangers?
10. We say “Blessed Are the Peacemakers,” but we consistently kill those who try to force change in our violence ways, and we call conscientious objectors naïve. How do liberals and conservatives view the path the peace differently? Is there a “Christian response” to violence?

Chapter 5:

Faith as Radically Embodied Trust

1. Why does the author believe that the word “faith” is the most misunderstood word in our religious vocabulary?
 2. Why does Dawkins believe that “faith” can be “lethally dangerous nonsense”?
 3. How does the author wish to shift the definition of “faith” and why does he prefer the word “trust”?
 4. What does Karl Barth mean when he writes, “The message of the Bible is that God hates religion”? What does he mean when he defines religion as a *grasping at God*?
 5. The author recounts a story about teaching a class called “Ethics of Communication” in which a critical moment always arrives when the class teaches itself. What is the lesson?
 6. The antidote for mistrust is something called BOD. What is that, and why it is so important?
 7. What does the author believe is the lesson of the Oak School experiment and its findings in the controversial book, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*? What does it have to do with “radically embodied trust”?
 8. What does the story about the matriarch’s challenge to her pastor after a lecture by scholars of the *Jesus Seminar* teach us about the importance of trust?
 9. The author tells two stories of what he calls “Mortal Mistrust.” One is about the “cult of the audible bread-breakers in Beebe Arkansas. The other is about the forced baptism of a terminal cancer patient named Rick. Why does the author call them “deadly”?
 10. What is the opposite of mortal mistrust, and how should the church do ministry to counter it?
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Chapter 6: *Renewing the Church Through Shared Mission*

1. The author tells a story about his trip to Riverside Church in New York City. What did that story reveal to the author?

2. What does the story of the author's trip to Fifth Street Missionary Church have to do with the idea of shared mission?
 3. The author uses Philip Gulley's chapter titles from his book, *If the Church were Christian* to explain what shared mission might look like. Look at each title/idea from Gulley and discuss how it relates to the idea of working together across our theological differences.
 4. Scholars tell us that *hospitality* was the central Christian virtue in the early church. What happened?
 5. The author said one of the most persistent divides between liberals and conservatives has to do with different definitions of sin. Evangelicals tend to focus on individual sin (primarily sexual), while progressives focus more on institutional sin (primarily economic). Is this true in your experience? Can you give Examples?
 6. What has happened in our time to the idea that the "stranger" may be Christ and should always be welcomed?
 7. Why does the author believe we need to do more than just march and give speeches to protest impending wars or other social/political issues?
 8. Is the idea of a church spending as much on mission as it spends on operations even a reasonable idea? What would have to change for this to become a reality?
 9. The author brings up civil disobedience and its rich history in the church. When, if ever, does the body of Christ risk arrest today in the pursuit of social and economic justice?
 10. Some have suggested that the church should not be tax exempt. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of such a change?
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Chapter 7: *Leavening the Imperial Loaf*

1. The author claims that many scholars consider the parable of the leaven to be the most authentic and subversive parable in the New Testament. Why?
2. What has been "lost in translation" that makes the radical nature of this parable hard to understand in modern times?
3. Why does the author say that the gospel is not "good news" to everyone who hears it?
4. Why does the author believe that the parable of the leaven should be the "signature" text for the Underground Church movement?

5. Read the paragraph on p. 176 which begins "After thirty years in the ministry. . ." and discuss what the author means by "ecclesiastical Alzheimer's."
6. A Mayflower member challenged the author to preach a "parabolic" Easter sermon. Why does the author contend that the parable of the leaven was perfectly suited to the task?
7. Why does the author contend that clergy, while often described as "nice" are really a "cautiously nervous lot." What does the story of the young minister who was called to a new church in a "practically unanimous" vote tell us about the clerical personality?
8. What does the author mean when he says that ministers are among the last people on earth who do *not* work for the Empire?
9. How does our common experience of communion reinforce the notion that we are "preaching to the choir"? What does the author suggest as a way to change communion in the Underground Church.
10. Why has food always been so important in the church, and how can we bring back the idea of the story of the loaves and the fishes?

Chapter 8: *Jesus Followers on the No-Fly List*

1. Read the epigraph (the opening quote under the chapter title) by John Dominic Crossan and discuss what you think it means.
2. Why does the author believe that Christians are no longer considered dangerous enough to be considered "persons of interest"? What did Bonhoeffer mean when he spoke of a "religionless Christianity"?
3. The author refers to the rise of a "masculine" Christianity, in which a whole movement has arisen in the church to recapture a more "muscular" Jesus. Why is this happening?
4. What are the "Woebetudes," and why are they often ignored in the church?
5. Why does the author contend that we should all become economists?
6. What does the author believe to be the true "Whore of Babylon"?
7. How might the church create its own underground economic system?
8. William Sloane Coffin used to say that it is the "non-economic" uses of money that make it so dangerous. What did he mean by this?
9. What makes boycotts such an effective tool of social change? Can a boycott be a Christian response to injustice

10. Discuss Gandhi's list of seven social sins, and see if you can provide contemporary examples of each.

Chapter 9:

The Underground Church on War, Sex, Money, Family, and the Environment

1. The author begins by saying that the renewal of the church comes by "doing," not by "thinking about doing." Why are churches so prone to "hyperintellectualism"?
2. Why is resistance to war considered the signature of the Underground Church?
3. What is the attitude of the Underground Church about sex? About money? About family? And the environment?
4. Read the manifesto of the Underground Church and discuss the ways in which the church might adapt some of its core values.
5. Discuss the seven characteristics of the Underground Church (p. 253) and identify ways in which they provide the possibility for shared mission.
6. In the list, "So Just Imagine," what ideas are the easiest to accomplish? Which are the most problematic?
7. Discuss the ways in which your church and the Underground Church are different. Similar.
8. Brainstorm ideas about how to do a single mission in your church that might be considered subversive for the cause of love.
9. Share ideas from the entire book that were particularly meaningful to you in either a positive or negative way.
10. Is it really realistic to imagine that churches of different theological traditions could work together in ways that we subversive for the cause of love? For example?