

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Convictions

by
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CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT MATTERS

1. Marcus Borg explains that he will share the triad of memories, conversions, and convictions that shaped his life and that also shape all our lives—what we remember, how we change, what we believe. Why are these categories a good starting place for a book about faith?
2. Borg lists five categories of modern Christians: conservative, conventional, uncertain, former, and progressive. Where do you see yourself on this spectrum? Have you always been in that place?

3. When Borg describes the various types of Christians, he says, “None of them has a monopoly on goodness” (p. 8). Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, why might this be one of the most radical and important statements of the book?

CHAPTER 2: FAITH IS A JOURNEY

1. How does understanding Borg’s childhood help you understand his faith journey? Looking back, how do you think your upbringing has shaped your faith journey?
2. Learning in college to think pluralistically proved to be a major conversion experience for Borg. Are people raised to think more pluralistically today, since our society is increasingly diverse? Why or why not?
3. Borg writes, “Even though we are only part of that unending conversation, only here for a while, our answers—or lack of answers—to the big questions matter. Our convictions—or lack of convictions—shape our lives” (p. 31). With whom do you talk about the big questions? With whom do you share your convictions?

CHAPTER 3: GOD IS REAL AND GOD IS A MYSTERY

1. Borg describes some of his mystical experiences, naming the first as “the richest minute of my life” (p. 37). He teaches us that mystical experiences typically include a sense of illumination and union (p. 39). What is your experience with mysticism? Do you believe it plays an integral role in faith, or are you skeptical? Do you think mysticism could heal the great divide in Christianity today?
2. Borg’s mystical encounters changed his perceptions about God and what is real (p. 43). Do you feel that Borg’s mystical experiences give you permission to think in a new way, by proclaiming that God is alive in everything right now?
3. Do you ever consider *how* you think about God? Do you see Borg’s conviction that “God is real” (p. 51) as the undergirding for the convictions that each of us holds? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 4: SALVATION IS MORE ABOUT THIS LIFE THAN AN AFTERLIFE

1. “The great stories of religion can be seen as true even though not literally factual” (p. 56). Have you observed your own children or those in your community move from innocent belief (precritical naïveté, p. 53) to scientific ambiguity (critical thinking, p. 54) to symbolic

understanding (postcritical affirmation, p. 56)? How many people do you know who left the church at the middle stage of critical thinking and never returned?

2. “Salvation in the Bible is seldom about an afterlife. . . . Jesus’s message was not about ‘how to get to heaven.’ It was about ‘the kingdom of God’” (pp. 60–62). Were these observations about the Bible and salvation new to you? Do you ever talk about heaven in your family, in your faith community, or among your friends? What are your thoughts about the afterlife?
3. Salvation in the Bible, according to Borg, focuses on themes of rescue, deliverance, light, and transformation. Christianity and salvation are “about transformation this side of death” (p. 75). How is this a handle-with-care statement? What do we risk when we ask God to “save us” in the sense of transformation rather than the traditional sense of saving us in the afterlife?

CHAPTER 5: JESUS IS THE NORM OF THE BIBLE

1. Borg says he gradually understood that when there is conflict between Jesus and the Bible, Jesus is the standard by which the Bible is understood (p. 81). How did this specific conversion unfold? What questions does Borg’s conviction raise in your mind?
2. What was your first response to Borg’s subtitle for this chapter, “Sometimes the Bible Is Wrong”? Which of his

examples on pages 85 to 93 resonate with your beliefs about God? Did you take issue with any?

3. “The Bible is a human product: it tells us how our religious ancestors saw things, not how God sees things” (p. 94). Do you agree or disagree with this? How might you read the Bible differently in the future based on this statement?

CHAPTER 6: THE BIBLE CAN BE TRUE WITHOUT BEING LITERALLY TRUE

1. How did Borg come to the conviction proclaimed in the title of chapter 6, What was his journey? Is this a journey you relate to? Many contemporary culture wars are based on the ways people were taught to think of the Bible. Where can Christians on the left and right begin to hear one another, even with our different understandings?
2. “Taking the Bible seriously is important. It is foundational to being Christian. It is our sacred scripture, essential to Christian understanding and identity. But taking the Bible literally is not the same as taking it seriously” (pp. 111–12). How would you describe the difference between taking the Bible seriously and taking it literally? How would a literalist take issue with Borg’s statement?

3. As he discusses reading the Bible in a metaphorical (parabolic) way, Borg quotes Thomas Mann, who defined myth as “a story about the way things never were but always are” (p. 121). Does thinking about the Bible in a more mythical way appeal to you? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 7: JESUS’S DEATH ON THE CROSS MATTERS

1. In chapter 7, Borg deconstructs resurrection theology and poses hard questions about what we assume about God based on our understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection. How many of the ideas that Borg raises about Jesus “dying for our sins” have you wondered about over the years? Have your convictions about this topic shifted throughout your life?
2. “The payment understanding of Jesus’s death has been a core element of common Christianity for a long time and is a defining feature of today’s conservative Christianity” (p. 133). How does Borg systematically challenge this way of thinking? What are the problems he cites with payment theology? Consider your own convictions about the cross; if you talked to someone else about this subject, how might you share what you believe about the cross?
3. “Some (perhaps many) Christians are surprised that the heart of Jesus’s message was the coming of the kingdom of God” (p. 139). Are you surprised? Do you think

non-Christians see Christians as people who are trying to bring about God's kingdom of fairness and compassion in the world?

CHAPTER 8: THE BIBLE IS POLITICAL

1. “The Bible from beginning to end is a sustained protest against the domination systems of the ancient world” (p. 155). Did you learn about ancient domination systems in Sunday school or confirmation class, or even in adult classes at your church? Has historical criticism effectively changed our faith formation?
2. Borg reminds us that “Paul, like Jesus, was executed by imperial authority” (p. 165). Who is at risk today of losing their lives by challenging the authorities in small and large ways? Who is at risk for not doing so?
3. Borg was shocked when he discovered that the Bible was a radically political book. “Once I saw the political meaning of the Bible, I wondered how I ever could have missed it. It is so obviously there. Of course, the Bible is also religious; it is about God and God's character and passion” (p. 163). Why do you suppose the connection between the Bible and politics has been downplayed? How has your understanding of the Bible as a political or nonpolitical story affected your choices of church, friends, and mission?

CHAPTER 9:
GOD IS PASSIONATE
ABOUT JUSTICE AND THE POOR

1. Borg ends chapter 9 with these words: “We need Amos” (p. 187). Why is that so? Why was the book of Amos life-changing for Borg?
2. Amos delivered threats that would change the lives of those in power—for example, loss of their privileged status through exile and destruction of their social order (p. 175). What prophets are speaking boldly about sin and change in the world today? What keeps each of us from boldly declaring God’s vision?
3. Borg points to Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul as he asks us to “imagine the courage it took to speak against the powerful and violent ruling elites. . . . Their courage came from their vocation as participants in God’s passion for a different kind of world” (p. 181). Where are we taught that our courage begins? Do we teach our children that our courage begins with God? Do you appreciate the faithful courage it takes when someone shares their convictions, even if you do not agree with them?
4. Borg points to American individualism as a nemesis of justice. What do you think about this? Have you lived in other places that did a better job of caring for God’s people? How did those systems function?

CHAPTER 10:
CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED
TO PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

1. “Following Jesus and taking seriously early Christian pacifism and subsequent teaching about justifiable war radically calls into question the widespread American Christian support of and acquiescence to our country’s preoccupation with military power. Those of us who are American and Christian need to ponder this in our hearts” (p. 208). What messages and history shaped your views on war and peace? Did you seek out your faith as a guide in determining what you believe? Did any spiritual leaders, biblical or modern, assist you along the way?
2. “I have become convinced that Christians who oppose war are more often right than wrong” (p. 208). Is “more often right than wrong” or “more often wrong than right” the only way we can ultimately deal with such complicated issues? How does Borg’s earlier caveat that his convictions should not be “construed as an indictment of those in our military forces, as if the moral issue is only an issue for them” (p. 207) speak to you?

CHAPTER 11:
TO LOVE GOD IS TO LOVE LIKE GOD

1. “Though believing in God and loving God can sometimes go together, they are not the same. One can believe all the right things and still not love God” (p. 212). What

is Borg getting at with this provocative distinction? Have you thought about it in this way before?

2. Borg reminds readers that loving God includes paying attention to God, our beloved. He describes three basic ways to pay attention to God: prayer to remind ourselves of the reality of God; worship to be part of a community that remembers God; and Bible reading to open ourselves to God (p. 218). If you participate in these practices, how has each revealed to you that God is paying attention to us? How has each helped you love God better? What ways did Borg miss?
3. Borg continually proclaims “God’s passionate love for those victimized by the systems of ‘this world’” (p. 222). What sin, ignorance, or pain keeps us from loving those people whom God loves?
4. According to Borg, Martin Luther said that “whatever we give our hearts to, whatever we treasure most, whatever we center in, that is our god” (p. 223). If a stranger looked at each of our lives (as well as our corporate lives as Christians), what would that person see as our gods?

A FEW FINAL QUESTIONS

1. Which of Borg’s convictions challenged you to expand your thinking? Which of his convictions did you disagree with? Why do you think it’s important to read

books by authors with whom we disagree as well as those with whom we agree?

2. What questions do you wish you could ask Borg?
3. How did this book compare with your own faith journey? Had you ever considered how your beliefs evolved? How does awareness serve us and others?