

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Christianity for the Rest of Us

by

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INTRODUCTION

1. The book title, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, refers to the unnoticed Christians who are not trying to be a moral majority or an extreme faction (p. 3). Do you consider yourself one of “the rest of us”? If you think of yourself as a Christian, how reticent or eager are you to declare yourself one, based on the definitions you hear about Christians?

PART I

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH?

CHAPTER 1: THE VANISHED VILLAGE

1. Village life, historically, has been understood as people who looked out for one another (p. 16), knew their place in this world (p. 17), and “shared a worldview based on order, reason, and objective truth—all based on the idea of a benevolent Creator” (p. 19). Did you grow up in a village like this? What have you seen change?
2. Butler Bass suggests that a new kind of village is emerging, “a pilgrim community embarked on a journey of rediscovering Christianity” (p. 25). Do you feel as if you are part of such a community? Have you seen signs of other pilgrim communities?

CHAPTER 2: REMEMBERING CHRISTIANITY

1. “Religion and history always intertwine; religion carries the traditions of the past, and history shapes faith” (p. 28). How does considering history and religion together help you make sense of your life, church, and country?

2. In the early 1800s, the Church of the Redeemer practiced a “creative third way” of faith that balanced individual faith with corporate responsibility. Today, the church still relies on this third way of religion, because it respects tradition while being open to change (pp. 33–34). Why is it hard for churches to practice this blend of tradition and open-mindedness?

CHAPTER 3: THE NEW VILLAGE CHURCH

1. “The primary job of church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith” (p. 42). Have you been part of faith communities that embodied this purpose? If so, how have the particular groups you’ve joined at church (choir, Bible study, prayer group, etc.) formed the faith of their group members?
2. Butler Bass names three characteristics evident in new village churches: tradition (*not* traditionalism), practice (*not* purity), and wisdom (*not* certainty) (p. 45). She gives Cornerstone United Methodist as an example on pages 45–46. What do you think sets this church apart in terms of practicing tradition without succumbing to traditionalism? How can this be done in other churches and faith communities, perhaps even your own?

CHAPTER 4: FINDING HOME

1. Themes of homecoming and return weave through today's spiritual pilgrimages, according to Butler Bass's research (p. 57). What's your story of pilgrimage? Are you one of the rare people still worshipping in the church where you grew up?
2. "Conversion is not an individual event" (p. 65); rather, conversion is a communal experience that happens as gradually as transformation. How does this idea change the way you think and feel about sharing your faith with others?

PART II TEN SIGNPOSTS OF RENEWAL

CHAPTER 5: HOSPITALITY

1. According to Butler Bass, there are many more spiritual wayfarers to welcome at church (p. 79). Do you agree?
2. Hospitality should not be a way of lassoing new members (p. 81). Share an experience of visiting an unfamiliar congregation. What was the welcome like? Did you feel noticed? Recruited?

CHAPTER 6: DISCERNMENT

1. Discernment often takes the form of questions for individuals and communities: Who am I? What does God want us to do with our lives? How can we be faithful to God's call (p. 91)? What do you find to be the most effective way to answer discernment questions—by talking, praying, writing, or some other way?
2. "Discernment requires that we pay attention," says Catholic theologian Wendy Wright. "You have to pay attention when you are not entirely sure where you are going" (p. 96). Who has taught you about paying attention? What have you learned about God by doing so?

CHAPTER 7: HEALING

1. Butler Bass points to healing as an ancient tradition when discussing vital practices made new in churches today (p. 106). How does healing work when we can't typically "cure the sick" as Jesus did?
2. What churches do you know that embody Teresa of Avila's words, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours" (p. 109)? How are they doing so?

CHAPTER 8: CONTEMPLATION

1. Butler Bass stresses the overabundance of “noise” in our culture (p. 118) and quotes Christian mystic Meister Eckhart: “Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence” (p. 120). Would you like to go to a church that practices silence as part of worship? Why or why not?
2. Gary Jones, a priest who practices meditative prayer, quoted Jung: “If you can’t stand to be alone in silence with yourself, why do you inflict yourself on us?” (p. 121). Do you think silence is achievable for everyone? What type of prayer works for you? What are some of the first steps a church can take to strengthen the practice of prayer among its members?

CHAPTER 9: TESTIMONY

1. Have you ever heard or delivered a testimony about God in your life? What stays with you from that experience? Why is it risky for pastors to encourage testimony in their congregations (p. 135)?
2. How does your attitude toward another person shift once you have heard them share their spiritual story?

CHAPTER 10: DIVERSITY

1. Regarding Goleta Presbyterian Church mentioned on pages 144–47, particularly their mission statement on page 147, what could our churches and government learn from Goleta’s commitment to practicing diversity? How do they make their commitment work?
2. Desmond Tutu explains the Biblical vision of diversity through the eyes of an African Christian. He believes that “a person is a person *through* other persons” (p. 152). What challenges does Tutu’s theology face in American culture?

CHAPTER 11: JUSTICE

1. “Unlike white Protestants, African American Christians spoke a different language of justice—one that was deeply spiritual and tapped into the stories of the Bible” (p. 159). What are your favorite justice stories in the Bible? How do you think ethnicity shapes people when it comes to understanding and speaking about justice?
2. Have you or your fellow church members ever experienced leaving your comfort zone and practicing justice? How did that experience change you or others who participated?

CHAPTER 12: WORSHIP

1. Anthony Robinson says that worship is “an experience of God” (p. 176). Butler Bass surmises that worship is an experience that celebrates Jesus and transforms the heart. What’s your best definition of worship?
2. An Ignatian thirty-day retreat shaped the ministry of Pastor Gary Erdos and his congregations. June, a woman in one of Erdos’s Ignatian spirituality groups, said the prayer experience changed her church “from being content and complacent about faith to being all that we can be to the glory of God” (p. 181). How can struggling congregations begin to tap into these ancient prayer practices?

CHAPTER 13: REFLECTION

1. For the people Butler Bass met during her study, “thinking theologically did not mean arriving at certain conclusions” (p. 191). Do you think it’s essential for people to realize they can’t just google the answers to existential questions?
2. Most of the folks Butler Bass met were looking for a church where they could ask questions (p. 198). Would it work for a church to hang a sign outside that says, “Your questions welcome here”? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 14: BEAUTY

1. Every so often Butler Bass includes the words to hymns in *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (p. 202). Do hymns reach deep places in you? What are some hymns that you remember?
2. Some Christians practice art as a way to proclaim God's message; others practice art as a way to engage with God's mystery (p. 213). Do you think most quilting groups think about the art they create as message or mystery?

PART III FROM TOURISTS TO PILGRIMS

CHAPTER 15: TRANSFORMING LIVES

1. Butler Bass uncovers a seldom-noticed aspect of Paul's conversion story. After his roadside conversion, Paul spent three years learning about Jesus and his way (p. 222). How have you witnessed conversion as a process of transformation in Christians you know?
2. Five traits of nomadic life are transformed as seekers become pilgrims: wandering becomes pilgrimage, busyness transforms into vocation, consuming changes to practicing, individual thinking turns into commu-

nity awareness, and forgetting what matters changes to remembering a story of faith. Which of these traits needs transformation in your life? Would you be willing to tell others about the things that separate you from God?

CHAPTER 16: TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONS

1. “In many ways, congregations are like individuals. People change when they encounter God in meaningful ways” (p. 242). Which of this book’s stories about congregations being transformed by faith practices resonate with you?
2. “Whether threatened by spiritual boredom or facing church closure, each congregation had asked two questions that sparked deep change: Who are we? What is God calling us to do?” (p. 243). Has your congregation asked these questions? What percentage of your community needs to be invested in change?

CHAPTER 17: TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

1. Do you agree with Butler Bass’s assessment that Protestants may be birthing a new radical religious center, which mingles red and blue ideology and focuses on Jesus’s teachings (p. 260)? Where do you glimpse “purple America”?

2. Are you afraid to share your Christian faith with non-church friends because they will assume you think in a particular political way (p. 265)?

EPILOGUE: HOME AGAIN

1. Butler Bass explains that the old Protestant mainline is no longer mainline and instead has become a “pilgrim-age church” (p. 282). Are churches caught in grieving that change? How can *Christianity for the Rest of Us* help move churches from grief to adaptation?