



The Secret Message of Jesus

Study Guide for Group Study

There are several ways to make use of this book in a group context. As you've seen in Appendix 2, Jesus' message was originally explored in a group of twelve, and groups like this have been excellent settings to process, dialogue, and engage with the message ever since. You could meet over a meal, at a home or in a restaurant or pub, in an office or church, or on a retreat or camping trip. (Some of the best conversations I have experienced have been in a group of two or three taking a long walk together.)

Here are three ways to arrange a conversation group:

- a) Give each participant a set time to share ideas from a chapter. Over three or five or ten minutes, each person offers his or her reactions, questions, insights, agreements, anecdotes, etc.
- b) Have each participant underline passages of interest, and then share those passages one by one. If two or more people underline the same passage, take extra time there.
- c) Appendix 2 gives a number of queries you can use to explore each chapter. They include:
 - What did you like best?
 - What didn't you understand?
 - What didn't you agree with?
 - What seems most relevant to your life?
 - What questions does this chapter raise for further study or discussion?

Also, you may find it helpful to establish an online group for dialogue.

Here are some specific questions to help you converse about this book chapter by chapter.

Introduction

1. Brian begins by talking about his own spiritual search. How would you describe your spiritual search? What are you looking for?
2. Brian refers to Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Have you read the book? What was its appeal? What hopes or concerns did it raise about Jesus and your understanding

of him? How did the picture of Jesus in Brown's novel contrast with what Brian calls "the conventional picture?"

3. The Introduction describes three kinds of readers. Which are you? How will that affect your reading?
4. Brian speaks of the difference between looking *at* the message of Jesus and looking *through* it. How could your group practice both kinds of looking during these conversations?

Chapter 1

1. What impact did the barrage of questions at the beginning of this chapter have on you? How many of the questions have you asked yourself?
2. "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere." Respond to this statement, and to Brian's analysis of it.
3. Brian talks about the potential message of Jesus being understood by Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others, in addition to Christians. You may wish to invite members of various religions to be part of your group, if they aren't already. What might their presence add? Why might Christians need outside perspectives to help them understand the founder of their own religion?

Chapter 2

1. How do you respond to the author's decision to begin with the political dimension of Jesus' message?
2. What might the political impact be of saying that Jesus' message has nothing to do with politics?
3. How would you describe your "interpretive grid" that affects the way you read the Bible and understand matters of faith?
4. Where might you see counterparts to the Essenes, Zealots, Pharisees, and Herodians/Sadducees today?
5. Imagine that Jesus showed up in our current political context. What might he talk about or be asked to respond to? Imagine him being interviewed by a TV journalist.

Chapter 3

1. Summarize the descriptions of and differences between priests and prophets. Where do you see priestly and prophetic dimensions of religious life today?
2. Have you ever considered Jesus as a prophet, continuing the tradition of the Jewish prophets? How might believing that Jesus was more than a prophet tempt people to see him as less than a prophet?
3. Discuss the timeline of Jewish history and see how various Bible stories you may know fit into this timeline.
4. How might the "at-handness" of Jesus' message be disturbing to people today? Do you think people take seriously the "at-handness" of Jesus' message? Why or why not?

Chapter 4

1. Reflect on Brian's retelling of the Biblical narrative. Does this retelling ring true for you? How does it differ from conventional versions you have heard?
2. Reflect on the author's understanding of Jesus' way of "fulfilling" the Biblical narrative. How does this strike you?
3. The author summarizes the revolutionary message of Jesus in his own terms. Imagine a contemporary religious leader conveying this message via TV or radio or podcast. How would people respond?
4. Brian calls this "the most revolutionary message of all time." Does this seem like an overstatement? Why or why not?

Chapter 5

1. This chapter's interpretation of the phrase "eternal life" is quite unconventional. Do you find it convincing? Why or why not?
2. If you are familiar with the four gospels, is there a favorite story of a private encounter with Jesus that you'd like to share with your group? Why does this story impact you?
3. What would be lost if we only had Jesus' public encounters, or only his private encounters? What is the significance of the fact that we have both?
4. The chapter ends with more questions, and with the observation that Jesus often answered questions with questions. Reflect on both Jesus' use of questions, and this author's use.

Chapter 6

1. Have you noticed the epigrams (brief quotations) that begin each chapter? Go back and reflect on them, and keep them in mind for this and following chapters.
2. Summarize how parables work.
3. The author struggles with the idea that some people are excluded by parables. Yet he concludes that this is the only alternative to coercive communication. How do you respond to this issue?
4. Reflect on the final paragraph of the chapter. What is the significance of a movement that advances "by stories, fictions, tales that are easily ignored"?

Chapter 7

1. How did you respond to the "parable" of the TV news reporter?
2. Review the idea of "the modern Western worldview" – and share your reaction to it. Contrast this worldview with what the author calls "the kingdom worldview."
3. Contrast the idea of "supernatural miracles" with "signs and wonders."
4. Consider some of Jesus' signs and wonders and "wonder" aloud about what they might "signify."

Chapter 8

1. How would you respond to the author's suggestion about suspending judgment about the factuality of the existence of devils and demons? Why might the author have taken this approach?
2. Give some examples of your experiences with "the spirit" of an organization – a government, corporation, family, church, denomination, sports team, club, ethnic community, etc.
3. In what ways could religious establishments and governments today be seen as demonic and how might they be cleansed or restored to health, sanity, and legitimacy?
4. Respond to the "scandalous" idea that Jesus' life, teaching, and suffering draws systemic evil into the light, exposes it, and defeats it. Can you imagine an alternative way to reach the same goal?

Chapter 9

1. Discuss the assets and liabilities, or the strengths and dangers, of being or not being part of "a missionary religion."
2. The story of the guitar player attempted to convey the meaning of "disciple" and "apostle." How do you personally relate to this story and these terms?
3. Tell about some people who have "played the music of the kingdom" for you.
4. Have you ever felt that you served in some way as "an apostle" – that God had prepared you and sent you to make the good news visible, tangible, sensible, or credible to others? Share your experiences.

Chapter 10

1. Pick 5 or 10 occupations or professions, beginning with your own, and explore the ways a person in this line of work could be "a secret agent of the kingdom of God."
2. Contrast "religious" with "spiritual." Is there a way these two concepts could be seen more as allies and less as opposites or competitors?
3. Brian describes his reflections sitting in a European cathedral. Have you had similar reflections? Share them.
4. Talk about what you could imagine for your life as a "secret agent of the kingdom of God" in the years to come.

Chapter 11

1. Describe your impressions (if you have any) of the apostle Paul in relation to Jesus.
2. Reflect on the analogies to Einstein and Dr. King. Do they "work" for you? How?
3. Have you ever considered Paul's major theme as reconciliation and inclusion in the kingdom of God? How would you test whether this understanding of Paul is valid?

Chapter 12

1. How did you respond to the “kingdom reading” of the passage from Paul’s Colossian letter?
2. How does the story of Onesimus become a living parable of Jesus’ message?
3. Can you recount stories of getting a glimpse of the kingdom through the lives of people you have encountered in your life so far?
4. The author says that part of this chapter was written “through tears.” Why do you think he was so moved? Have you had any strong emotional responses so far in your reading?

Chapter 13

1. Describe your experience of “repentance” and reflect on the soccer story as a parable of repentance.
2. Share your experience with faith, both “believing that” and “believing in.” The author (through the story of the boy leaping into his father’s arms” also relates faith to imagination. How does this story connect with your experience?
3. How have you experienced and fostered “receptivity” as described in this chapter?
4. The author connects baptism with “going public” and being committed. How would you describe your commitment to Jesus and his message at this point in your life? Have you ever “gone public” – and how? If you wanted to be baptized, who would you ask to baptize you, and why?

Chapter 14

1. Respond to the author’s reflections on “the beatitudes” – and add your own reflections.
2. The author identifies the “thesis statement” of Jesus’ manifesto, and calls it “profoundly disruptive and insulting” to the religious leaders of his day. Why would it be so disruptive, and do you think Jesus’ manifesto would be similarly disruptive to today’s religious establishments? Why?
3. Reflect on the “you have heard it said – but I say to you” parts of the manifesto. How do they relate to your life?
4. The author anticipates that some readers will at this point judge the message of Jesus as “unrealistic.” How do you respond?

Chapter 15

1. Choose one of the practices (giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting) and share your reactions to its treatment in this chapter. Recount your experiences with this practice.
2. Show how money, sex, and power (greed, lust, and pride) relate to these three practices. Also, how does each practice relate to the management of fear?
3. Respond to the three questions at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 16

1. Summarize the problems of using “kingdom language” today.
2. Choose one of the six proposed metaphors that you like most and share why. What problems or misconceptions could arise from overusing this metaphor? What other metaphor might help correct these problems?
3. Choose one of the metaphors mentioned in the last three paragraphs of the chapter and talk about its strengths and weaknesses.
4. Imagine how the message of Jesus might be conveyed in some art form not involving words.

Chapter 17

1. How would you summarize John the Baptist’s instructions for expressing repentance? How might these instructions apply to some ethical issue today?
2. Share your reflections on pacifism and just war theory.
3. Respond to Brian’s three responses to “competing demands.”
4. Respond to Brian’s “third way” in response to war, and explain the term “active peacemaking” as you understand it.

Chapter 18

1. Why do you think the Christian religion is so often perceived as “divisive, judgmental, rancorous, and exclusionary” – in contrast to the inclusive message of Jesus?
2. Respond to “the parable of the sheep farmer.”
3. The author describes “purposeful inclusion” as an alternative to “narrow exclusion” and “naïve inclusion.” How does this strike you? Whom does it exclude, and how do you feel about that?
4. Have you experienced conflict, struggle, or exclusion as you have tried to practice the inclusiveness of the message of Jesus? Share your experiences.

Chapter 19

1. Contrast “the timeline approach” with “the parenthood approach,” and contrast “the prognostication approach” with the “warnings and promises approach.”
2. Respond to seeing the Book of Revelation as “literature of the oppressed” rather than as prognostication.
3. Summarize the “conventional, counter-, and creative futures approaches outlined in this chapter, and explore what each might look like today.
4. The author describes two different worlds or futures near the end of the chapter, and he seems to feel a lot is at stake as we choose between them. How do you respond?

Chapter 20

1. Have you ever considered the events of AD 67-70 as the fulfillment of some or all of Jesus' imagery of "the end of the world" (as we know it)? How might you test the legitimacy of this understanding? If it is legitimate, why might people be slow to accept it?
2. How does the harvest image help you think about life after death – in general, and personally?
3. Discuss how views of life after death led to different behaviors among Sadducees, Pharisees, Hellenists, and Zealots. How would similar views be reflected in lifestyles and cultures today?
4. Respond to one or more of the quotes by Walter Wink or C. S. Lewis included in this chapter.

Chapter 21

1. When have you gotten a glimpse of the kingdom of God? Share some stories.
2. Between now and your next meeting, pay special attention for glimpses of the kingdom to share and celebrate at your next meeting.
3. Respond to the Revelation 11:15 passage and the reflections on it in this chapter. Consider listening (privately, or as a group, or both) to the relevant section of Handel's "Messiah" (and turn the volume loud!).
4. Reflect on the "truly creative tension" described in the last paragraphs.

Afterword and Appendices

1. Respond to the Oscar Romero poem.
2. The Afterword ends with the words "Don't you think?" What thoughts linger as you finish this book? What will you keep thinking about? What will you do or try or explore? How has your group conversation affected you? What do you want to say to your group members?
3. Consider the next steps for your group. Will you pursue some of the suggestions in "Plotting Goodness?"
4. How do you respond to "Why Didn't We Get it Sooner?"
5. Be sure to read the extra chapter (and other resources) included on this website – especially "The Prayer of the Kingdom."
6. Perhaps you'd like to read and/or discuss this book again with a different group of readers. To which friends would you like to recommend this book, or give it as a gift? How would you describe its effect on you? How would you encourage others to read it?
7. Ten years from now, how would you like the reading of this book to have influenced your life? What can you do in the coming days to increase the likelihood of that outcome?