

Study Guide for *Radical Christian Discipleship*

John Howard Yoder

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Radical. Christian. Discipleship. These three words must be confronted head on. At the beginning of each of the book's three parts, this guide gives you an opportunity to create a working definition of "radical Christian discipleship." Don't feel you need to come up with an expert's definition. Simply write down your feelings, thoughts and current understanding of what you view "radical Christian discipleship" to be. At the end of each section you will have space to edit from your previous working definition. Do your best to keep the definition no longer than three to five sentences.

If you are studying the book in a group, you may work at a definition together or individually and come back together to discuss each of your working definitions.

Introduction

How do the editors define "radical?" How is this different from your current assumptions or understanding? How is it the same?

Part One— Beyond Conformity

Chapter 1—A Choice of Slaveries

Which parts of your culture carry the most influence in your life? In what ways do they form who you are?

Other than war and money, what are the other gods of our culture? Where do you see evidence of these gods?

What makes people inclined to shape cultural gods?

Yoder states that the greatest idol is "me." How do you respond to that claim?

Chapter 2—To Thine Own Self Be True

How do you understand "the self" as Yoder describes it in chapter 2? Write down everything that comes to mind.

What happens when we adopt an attitude or lifestyle of self-abnegation in addressing the bigger questions in life? (such as vocation, family, location, other commitments) In what ways is this different from our greater society?

“Church as people” (page 35): what are the sacrifices of the self that take place while living in and participating in the church? What does this look like in practice?

Chapter 3—As If Not

Do you agree with the statement “who we are is where we fit in” (page 37)? Why or why not? Write down, or share practical examples or experiences to support your thoughts.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:29-35. What points of Paul have special meaning for you, and why?

Yoder writes, “Do not let the normal obligations derived from your place in this society have an ultimate hold on you” (page 39). What is your experience when hearing this statement in light of the 1 Corinthians text?

Can you belong in Christian community before you believe? Is there a proper sequence between belief, behavior and belonging?

In what specific places in your neighbourhood would you like to see an encounter between the hope of the gospel and the despair of hopelessness?

Chapter 4—Godly Arrogance

What is the public perception of a “New Testament”-style arrogance in our world today? How is it possible to carry this “arrogance” while still respecting our neighbours of different faiths?

Read Acts 17:29-31. Write down, or share the highlights from your reading.

What are your thoughts on the phrase “we have confused the gentility of weak conviction with the gentleness of witnessing.” What implications does this confusion have on evangelism and sharing of faith? How do you evangelize?

“The particular temptation of contemporary Christian communities is to tailor our beliefs so that they are socially respectable” (page 47). In your context, how much does the church conform to the world around it? What does conformity look like? What leads the church to give up its stance of nonconformity?

Read the poem by Taylor Mali “Totally like whatever, you know?” at:

<http://taylormali.com/poems-online/totally-like-whatever-you-know/> . How do you live your convictions?

Chapter 5—Divine Foolishness

What thoughts and images does the cross evoke for you? Compare and contrast those thoughts and images with your sense of how our greater society views the cross.

Yoder gives adult baptism and clothing as examples of nonconformity by communities/churches who were striving to be obedient in their particular time and place. Where in your life and your community do you see an urgent need for the practice of nonconformity, grounded in faithful obedience?

Based on your reflections up to the end of part one, review your working definition of “Radical Christian Discipleship.” How has it changed? How is it the same?

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Part Two—Reshaping Non-Conformity

Chapter 6—The Subtle Worldliness

What values and actions do you associate with good common sense and respectable citizenship? Make a list. Explain your choices.

In your own words describe the “crusader” mentality that Yoder identifies on pages 55 and 56.

In your neighborhood or town, who is labelled “good” and who is labelled “evil”? Why?

What are some effective ways in which to stay connected with what is going on in our world?

What is the more effective way to gain a critical understanding to our social, economic, and political systems?

Why is it easier to view the “other” as the enemy, than to see oneself as “innocent” or “good?”

What would make it difficult?

Chapter 7—The Respectable Worldliness

Read Luke 12:13-21. Write down your thoughts and wonderings about the text. How do your thoughts match Yoder’s reflection on the text on page 61? Where are they challenged?

How can wealth become idolatry? What are the implications if we do not take this danger seriously?

How does faith inform our use of money?

How does a culture of entitlement impact the manner in which we view and interact with wealth? Where else in our lives does this entitlement mentality impact us? In what ways does it help or hinder our faith?

On page 63, Yoder writes that “The Pharisees in Jesus’ time, and many believers in our day, felt that [tithing] was done with the tithe. Yet Jesus’ only mention of the tithe was unfavorable. He did not object that it is too much to ask, but that it is ten times too little. It hides the real problem of stewardship, which is that every cent belongs to God and must be used to God’s glory.” In what ways can you be faithful with your money? What does this look like for you in your specific place?

On pages 63 and 64, Yoder speaks of savings, life insurance, and mutual aid as ways to support those whose income is affected by “old age, sickness, or loss of the breadwinner.” –. What is the underlying value within each option? Work through the practicality of those options by listing what would happen in your own life if you were to follow them.

Chapter 8—Non-Conformity and Nation

List several examples of “ misfits” in history and fiction. What made them to be misfits?

On page 69 Yoder writes, “Our present concern is the idea that religion is a binding force that creates national unity, instead of demand for higher obedience that brings ‘peace, not the sword.’” How do you agree or disagree with this idea?

Where in your life do you find that indifference or compromise hurts your identity as a disciple of Jesus? In such instances, why is indifference or compromise detrimental?

Yoder speaks of “a point when a choice must be made between unqualified love of neighbor and unqualified national loyalty.” Where do you face such choices today? How does an obedience to “an unqualified love of neighbour” conflict with an “unqualified national loyalty”?

Consider the six elements of what it would mean to follow Christ “in but not of the world” found on pages 72-74. How do you agree or disagree with each one? What would it look like to live in this way? What else would you add?

Chapter 9—Time and the Christian

Read Ephesians 5:15-16. How would you describe your general attitude to “time” as described in the first few paragraphs in this chapter? How do you spend your time?

Yoder writes, “Time means an opportunity to glorify God” (page 77). How do you respond to this statement? Why?

How does it change the idea of vocation if we drop “full time Christian” service language and identify all work as giving glory to God?

Analyze the rhythm of your regular week. Where do you work? Where do you find rest?

Chapter 10 - Discipleship and Self Assertion

Read Ephesians 5:21-33. Write down your highlights and questions. What does it mean to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ?

How is church discipline practiced and received today? In what other ways can people be held accountable?

How is “true individuality” nurtured within a communal submissiveness to Christ? Write down practical examples.

Chapter 11—Let Your Yes Be Yes

Where within our culture do we see untruthfulness? What is the function of falsehood? Why do people lie?

How does honesty and truthfulness open up space for deeper connection within community?

How have you experienced this in your life?

Read Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:5. What does it mean to speak truth with your neighbour? Tell of a time when tough truth-telling led to positive change.

Chapter 12—Love Unlimited

Read the parable of the “Good Samaritan” in Luke 10:30-37. How would you define the word “neighbour” as it is used by Jesus?

Make a list of where and how the word *love* is used in your context. Review the list and create a definition of love, according to our society. How does the love of Christ compare to this?

How do we move beyond the “limits of human solidarity” and “assume responsibility and the cost” of love (page 92)? What are the implications in our lives? Is it worth it to love like Jesus? Why or why not?

Chapter 13—The Christian Declaration of Dependence

What are the images and thoughts that come to mind when you think of the word slave? How do you react to the notion of you being a slave?

Explain the difference between “freedom from” and “freedom to.” (page 97)

Read Galatians 5:13-14. Paul asks us voluntarily to become slaves to one another. Why do you think he use such imagery? What keeps us from doing that, especially in the church? What are some positive examples of such self-giving love?

Chapter 14—The “Greater Righteousness”

How is following Jesus different from simply following rules? Which do you find most attractive? What challenges do you find in both options?

In what ways do you find yourself empathizing with the Pharisees? In what ways do you find yourself frustrated with them?

How does a faith that is contained within a set of rules function to “keep God to itself?”

Chapter 15—The Christian’s Peace of Mind

In what ways is it possible to dislike religion and love Jesus? In what ways is religious structure important?

“The more our piety and our principles approach what God wants of us, the greater is the danger that we make them substitutes for constant fellowship with God”(page 111). How have you encountered that danger in your own life? Where do you see it in the church?

What is the function of tradition? What are the consequences of a church’s faithfulness to the “God of our ancestors?”

Make a list of the many Christian rituals and traditions in the Christian faith. Why were they started in the first place and what meaning do they hold today?

Chapter 16—Love Seeks Not Its Own

According to Yoder, what are common criticisms that one could level against both communism and capitalism? What is significant about the similarities?

On page 120 Yoder writes that the giving of Christians is “is not for the sake of being set apart, but because of their love for the world and the needy.” He follows with seven examples of what it could look like. Review the examples. Do you agree or disagree with Yoder’s approach?

Why? What else would you add to his list?

Yoder is not convinced that Christians in general have forsaken all the world to follow Jesus. Do you agree or disagree? What would it look like for us to “forsake all” in practical terms?

Chapter 17—Rejoicing in Hope

Read Hebrews 11. What common features are found in the heroes of faith cited in this chapter? What is your response to the statement on page 124, “Only ‘with God’ can time and effort, life and history, have meaning.” How does this conviction bring hope?

In what ways do you find hope in God’s promises? What does it look like to count on the promises of God?

Describe in your own words the relationship between nonconformity, hope, and missions as Yoder describes it at the end of the chapter. In what ways do you agree and disagree with his argument?

Based on your reflections up to the end of part one and part two, re-engage your working definition of “radical Christian discipleship.” How has it changed? How is it the same? Where are you finding more depth in your current sense of what the term means.

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Part 3—Conforming to Christ

Chapter 18—The Meaning of the Cross

Summarize the traditional views of atonement as described on pages 132–135. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each view? What are the implications of each when we follow Jesus in our particular context?

Review the four meanings of the cross found on pages 136–137. In what ways do they confirm or change your views of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

In what ways do you agree or disagree that “we use ‘the cross’ too cheaply?” How does our view of the cross affect our experience of discipleship?

In what ways is the image of “the cross” and its sacrifice used in the church and in the world today?

What is the relationship between nonconformity and suffering?

Martin Luther King Jr said that “the cross” is a forgiving, suffering “community creating reality that moves through history.” (page 140) How do you respond to that image? What would following that vision do to your neighborhood?

Chapter 19—The Price of Discipleship

Re-read Luke 14:16-33. Write down your highlights, questions, wonderings when reading the text.

If the “the cross” simply meant death in 1st century Palestine, in Jesus’ context, what then is the meaning of its usage in the Luke text you reviewed above?

On page 143 Yoder writes, “In church and in mission, the competitive nature of North American church life has heightened our awareness of needing to attract people and not wanting to turn them off or have them change channels.” What does this say about evangelism? What are the implications of avoiding the language of sacrifice?

What has history done to people who strive for a new social order? What have been the social consequences of adopting a radical cause?

How can we attract people to a faith that requires sacrifice?

In what ways can communities of “disciples who sacrifice” support and empower one another?

How do you see this support in your church today?

Chapter 20—Peace as Proclamation

In what ways is the peace position speaking to today’s realities? What are the complexities that it brings?

“We are aware, as our parents were not, that the way we are housed and the way we transport ourselves are part of the oppression of a globally unjust society. We are not sure what we can do to change it” (page 159). In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement? How does Yoder’s vision inform an understanding of peace?

Is separatism conformity or non-conformity? Why?

Compare and contrast “peace as a proclamation” and “peace as a problem” (pages 158–62).

How do you engage peace as proclamation in your context? How is peace as proclamation practical? What does it communicate?

Chapter 21—Discipleship as Missionary Strategy

As you reflect on the story of the Wheathill colony at the beginning of the chapter, what connections do you see between discipleship and evangelism? What concrete lessons can we take from this ?

Do you tend to define yourself by what you are “for” or by what you are “against”? Why? What is the difference?

On page 166, Yoder writes the following of the Hutterians’ approach to mission, “Evangelism is thus directed not at the children of Christian families and people on the fringe of the church. It is directed at people of good will ... who know nothing of the gospel message, but are ripe to

receive it.” How does this square with your own understanding and practice of sharing the good news? How might it challenge the church today?

Briefly review the ways in which Yoder suggests we can restore the baptismal commitment found on pages 168–70. What would their implementation look like today in practice?

How do your commitments distinguish you from others?

Chapter 22—He Keeps My Commitment

What is the difference between “making God attractive to humans” and “making humans attractive to God”? How does each orientation affect one’s sharing of the gospel?

Yoder writes on page 172, “In the mere suggestion that it might be humanity’s prerogative to decide whether to be ‘persuaded’ of God’s ability ... lies the seed of all the humanistic heresies of our age.” In what ways do you find yourself needing God to prove God’s self to you?

In a world filled with distractions, how can we be attentive to the story of Jesus? What are some helpful ways to read and encounter Scripture?

What spiritual practices create room for the Spirit of Christ in our lives? How do they facilitate discipleship?

How can we hold in tension our trust in the ultimate triumph of God over the sin of the world and our commitment to following Jesus in the way of the cross? What are the challenges of living in this tension? What gives you hope?

Do a final “edit” of your working definition of “Radical Christian Discipleship.” After you work through it, pay attention to where it has grown over the previous definitions, noting what you have added and subtracted. And note that even though you have finished working through this book, your understanding will continue to change as you continue to explore and follow in the footsteps of Christ.

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