

REAL CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

John Howard Yoder

Edited by John C. Nugent, Branson L. Parler, and Heather L. Bunce

Study guide by Chris Lenshyn

Real. Christian. Fellowship. John Howard Yoder engages these three words prophetically and poetically. This guide gives you an opportunity to create a working definition of real Christian fellowship. Don't think that you need to come up with an expert's definition. Simply write down your feelings, thoughts, and current understanding of what you view real Christian fellowship to be. At the end of each section, you will have space to edit 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

1. How would you describe Christian community, based on your experiences and understandings of the term?
2. Relatedly, how would you define real Christian fellowship?

Part One: Believing

Chapter 1: Believing Is Foreign

1. Yoder writes, "Faith means that we accept being cut off from the normal ways in which a society is put together, in which a family takes care of its future, in which a social unit defends itself" (page 23). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?
2. According to Yoder, in what ways does faith mean obedience? In what ways is this common with your experience? In what ways is it not?
3. In what ways does faith connect people of faith around the world? What are the practical implications of this?
4. Based in your experience or stories you have heard, what are some healthy examples of mission? What are some unhealthy examples of mission? What is at the heart of the difference?
5. In what ways is the "capacity for choice" (page 30) a privilege and a burden?

Chapter 2: Believing Is Resurrection

1. How is resurrection central to Christian discipleship?
2. According to Yoder, what is the "even deeper weakness" (38) in the argument about dilemma? In your experience with what Yoder calls "dilemmas," have you witnessed divine intervention?
3. What is the connection between the cross and the lordship of Christ? What are the implications for people of faith?
4. Do you find Yoder's engagement of "the evidence for Jesus' resurrection" (pages 40–43) convincing? Why or why not?
5. After reading this chapter, re-read Romans 6:3-13 (page 33). How do you look at this passage differently? What are the implications?

Chapter 3: Believing Is Coherent

1. In a post-Christian world, how would you describe a religious worldview? Would you use the same descriptors Yoder uses on pages 45–46?
2. What are some of your questions about faith? Which questions do you find very difficult to answer? Is coherence important for you?

Chapter 4: Believing Is Freedom

1. When talking about various worldviews, Yoder writes “Yet they all assume that human beings will basically do what they are made to do” (page 52). In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement? Is this true of our world today?
2. What are the implications of Christian freedom?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the assumptions Yoder identifies about the people who “control history” (page 53)? How do they relate to those who have power in your particular context? Are they evil, as Yoder would define it?
4. Review and highlight the main points in the “Determinism from the inside” section found on pages 56–58. How have you experienced determinism from the inside? How have you not?
5. After reading the chapter, how would you describe “believing as freedom”?

Chapter 5: Believing Is Fellowship

1. What is Yoder’s definition of fellowship (page 63)? In which places have you experienced a deep sense of this?
2. Discuss this sentence: “The meaning of faith is that we are brought into specific local sharing, not only into vague universal fellowship” (page 64). How are faith and sharing interconnected? Where have you experienced both vague universal fellowship and specific local sharing?
3. How can fellowship “save us” from self-centeredness? Name some practical examples.
4. Explore the similarities and difference between *community* and *fellowship*. How do they complement each other?
5. How does fellowship mean belonging? What is a practice that identifies belonging to an Anabaptist fellowship? How is it practiced in churches in your context?
6. Based on your reflections up to the end of Part One, review your working definition of real Christian fellowship. How has it changed? How is it the same?

Part Two: Gathering

Chapter 6: Binding and Loosing

1. What are the two ways people can interpret binding and loosing, according to Yoder?
2. What is the rule of Christ (page 77)? How is the rule of Christ practiced today?
3. Based on your reading of this chapter, how would you describe binding and loosing?

Chapter 7: Breaking Bread

1. How does the risen Lord help describe the importance of the fellowship meal?
2. Describe the role of the common meal in the early church. What are some of the similarities today?
3. Yoder identifies two results of the Lord's Supper being practiced infrequently. What are they? In what ways do you agree or disagree with Yoder's results?
4. How is the Lord's Supper practiced in your context? What is the meaning of the practice?

Chapter 8: Making Disciples

1. Read 1 Peter 2:1-10. What language does Peter use to describe the church? What is the main theme? What is the connection between these themes and making disciples?
2. Yoder talks about the difference between second-generation procedures for baptism and those within the missionary context (pages 88–89). In what ways do you agree or disagree with his assessment?
3. Identify the tension in having “closed” or “open” Lord's Supper or baptism fellowship gatherings.

Chapter 9: Agreeing with Christ

1. In what ways have you experienced God's continual work in the world in your particular time and place? How has the church been part of that work?
2. How would you describe the testing of the spirits? How would you apply the criteria today?
3. “The unity of the church—the internal criterion for making sure it is the true Spirit who speaks – is more than just local agreement. We must maintain a close connection to the worldwide Christian fellowship” (page 95). How do we maintain a close connection to the worldwide Christian fellowship as it applies to the current work of the church? In what ways is a global perspective important?

Chapter 10: Embracing Equality

1. On page 96–98, Yoder engages many issues related to the 1 Corinthians 11 text. Which ones are most prominent for you?
2. Yoder claims that Paul is saying “that even though the gospel produces change, true gospel change does not simply smash the status quo. Rather, it transforms the personal realities and relationships within the status quo” (page 102). Articulate the difference between “smashing the status quo” and “transforming the status quo.”
3. Yoder suggests three reasons that this passage was written for the Corinthian church (page 106). How do those reasons affect your context today?
4. How does your community or church embrace equality? How does it engage 1 Corinthians 11:3-7, 13-15? Interview some Christian leaders or pastors in your context to fully grasp this question.

Chapter 11: Repenting from Sin

1. Compare and contrast personal repentance with institutional repentance.
2. Review the six counterfeit forms of repentance (pages 115–118). What would you add? What would you remove? Why?
3. How would you explain real repentance? How would you experience it?
4. Based on your reflections up to the end of Part Two, review your working definition of real Christian fellowship. How has it changed? How is it the same?

Part Three: Serving

Chapter 12: Sharing with One Another

1. In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Helping others is not an extraneous duty or arbitrary command; it is an integral part of the Christian experience” (page 122)?
2. According to Yoder, why must we “pay attention to the poor who are always with us, as Jesus said” (page 124)? What are the implications of paying attention to the poor?
3. Get a sense of how your city or town relates to the homeless by searching for news stories, articles, blog posts, and television clips. How would you describe the relationship? Would that accurately reflect how the churches in your context engage this demographic as well?

Chapter 13: Caring for the Poor

1. What is the cost of caring for the poor? How can the cost, as Yoder describes it, been seen as too high for our North American context?
2. In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement: “We know that God is against the rich because they have taken what they have from the poor.”
3. What are the barriers—social, institutional, or relational—that prevent people from interacting with the poor in your context?
4. Challenge yourself to build a relationship with at least one person below your tax bracket.

Chapter 14: Using All Gifts

1. Read Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, and Ephesians 4. What verses within these passages jump out at you? Sit with those verses and ask yourself why they caught your attention. Write down your responses.
2. Compare and contrast how Paul calls the church to discern gifts (page 134–36) and how churches in your context currently do this practice. How do churches name and empower gifts?
3. What is the impact of professionalized specialization on the equity and practice of gifts in the church?
4. What are your gifts?

Chapter 15: Witnessing at Work

1. How would you define Christian vocation?
2. When talking about finding vocation, Yoder states, “the aim is the service of God toward the redemption of humanity, which encompasses the whole fabric of our religious, social, and economic relations.” How does this aim change the way in which people choose vocation?
3. What vocational work is, or would be, spiritually rewarding for you?

Chapter 16: Evangelizing like Jesus

1. At the end of this chapter, Yoder states: “Our theology and evangelism would be better if we clarify that Jesus called us to be fishers of people and not anglers.” Describe the difference between being a fisher of people and an angler.
2. Based on your reflections up to the end of Part Three, review your working definition of real Christian fellowship. How has it changed? How is it the same?

Part Four: Singing

Chapter 17: Telling the Old Story

1. Read Psalm 136. What verses within the passage caught your attention? Sit with those verses and ask yourself why they jumped out at you. Write down your responses.
2. Why is it important to remember that God has “done things for us”?
3. For Yoder, what is the difference between “singing a story” and “telling a story”? Why is the difference important?
4. Who are the people in your context who are worth celebrating? Whose story is praise to God? How could you incorporate the telling of these stories in your community?
5. What is the story of your community? How is it connected to the biblical story? How do you share that story with others?

Chapter 18: Lifting Our Heads

1. Read Psalm 24. What are the verses within the passages that jump out at you? Sit with those verses and ask yourself why they caught your attention. Write down your responses.
2. According to Yoder, what are the obstacles to singing the Psalms in communal contexts? In what ways do you agree or disagree?
3. How does understanding the original meaning of Psalm 24 affect your reading and application today?
4. In Yoder’s overview of the Christian interpretations of Psalm 24 (pages 170–74), which resonate with traditions you are familiar with? If you are not familiar with any of the traditions, which resonate with you at the moment of this reading? Why?

Chapter 19: Singing in Exile

1. Read Psalm 137. What verses jump out at you? Sit with those verses and ask yourself why they held your attention. Write down your responses.
2. According to Yoder, how did living in exile affect Jewish identity? Imagine what living in exile would be like. What are some contemporary examples of a people in exile?
3. What recent historical developments (page 181) made the historical exile relevant? What are the main differences between the two developments? According to Yoder, what is the message of the exile for these two distinct historical developments?
4. Can a people seeking God's liberation also serve the place of their exile? How is it possible or impossible?
5. In your context, do you relate with people in exile seeking liberation or with people in power?

Chapter 20: Singing a New Song

1. Read Revelation 4–5. Which verses jump out at you? Why? Write down your responses.
2. Discuss this quotation: “A message of truth means more when it is embedded in fresh experience. That experience means even more when embellished with a well-known poem, story, or song” (page 194). What are the artistic “embellishments” of truth in your context? In what ways does your fellowship create?
3. What is the significance of this text being written to a church movement that was losing steam (page 197)?
4. Describe what the phrase *kingdom of priests* means (page 200). Why is this important? Why not? Are you part of a fellowship that considers itself to be a kingdom of priests?
5. Why do you think this chapter is entitled “Singing a New Song”?
6. Do a final “edit” of your working definition of real Christian fellowship. 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 in real Christian fellowship.

