

A Conspiracy of Love: A Discussion Guide

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This study guide for *A Conspiracy of Love: Following Jesus in a Postmodern World* is divided into eight sessions for small group use. Each session will cover about 25–35 pages of the book.

- Session 1: Preface / Introduction (pp. ix–xviii)
- Session 2: Following Jesus / The Two Gospels (pp. 3–30)
- Session 3: The Kingdom of God / A Conspiracy of Love (pp. 31–68)
- Session 4: The Prophetic Jesus / The Apocalyptic Christ (pp. 71–108)
- Session 5: The Postmodern World / The Spiritual Journey (pp. 111–143)
- Session 6: Cultural Nonconformity (pp. 144–170)
- Session 7: Bonhoeffer’s Vision / Contemplation and Action (pp. 173–199)
- Session 8: The Ethics of Love / Agents of Love (pp. 200–223)

The leader may want to begin each session by asking participants to identify any ideas or concepts that they especially reacted to—both positively and negatively—in the previous week’s reading. Use these as a possible list for further exploration and discussion by the entire group.

Session 1: Preface / Introduction

This first session can be used to establish a baseline of where individuals currently are in their spiritual and religious lives before encountering the ideas in the book.

1. Briefly describe your own religious and spiritual journey up to this point.
2. What is your current relationship with the church? (Love it / Hate it / Indifferent / It’s complicated)
3. Has your relationship to the church evolved or changed in any way as you have matured?
4. Has your understanding of God changed over your lifetime?
5. Surveys show that the largest growing religious group in the United States is the category known as the “nones,” those who respond “none of the above” when asked about their religious preference. They are also referred to as “unaffiliated.” They now represent 23 percent of the adult American population, outnumbering Roman Catholics (21 percent) and Mainline Protestants (14 percent), and will soon surpass Evangelicals

(25 Percent). Some are atheists, some are agnostics, but many simply say they are “nothing in particular.” Many are Millennials, but the “nones” are increasing in every age group. Most of the “nones” (perhaps 78 percent) are actually “dones,” people who have once been a part of organized religion but have now left and no longer identify as Christian, Jew, or Muslim. For some, the term “Christian” has been sullied by the religious right and pedophile priests, and they therefore disassociate with that label. Sixty percent of the unaffiliated tell pollsters they simply “don’t believe” anymore, agreeing with the statement “I question a lot of religious teachings.” Have you personally witnessed this cultural shift? Are there any church teachings that you question?

Session 2: Following Jesus / The Two Gospels

1. We all have an image of Jesus, not just in how he may have looked, but more importantly in regards to his identity (human/divine), his mission (personal salvation/social justice), and his message (heaven later/life now). Try to remember your image of Jesus as a child. Then think of your image in young adulthood. Have those images changed in any way since you have matured?
2. Can a person be a believer in Jesus, yet not follow Jesus?
3. The author contends that disciples are people who are clearly counter-cultural. Do you agree?
4. How do you react to the author’s discussion of the nature of sin as egocentricity and selfishness?
5. Should the church primarily concern itself with sin in the personal realm or in the social realm?
6. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) wrote in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) that individual morality is often disconnected from the sometimes brutal behavior of our collective life, especially in relation to the poor. In other words, people who may be compassionate and generous with family and friends can often be uncaring and selfish in the political realm where they hold judgmental stereotypes of the “other.” Yet, Niebuhr suggests that individual morality may be the only force that can mitigate the persistence of social immorality. Do you agree? How can moral or ethical individuals influence the social order?
7. There is an ongoing debate between Christians as to whether the “gospel *about* Jesus” or the “gospel *of* Jesus” is more important for the Christian life. It can also be viewed as a debate between the importance of orthodoxy (right belief) or orthopraxy (right living) as the heart of Christianity. Imagine that there is a line stretching from one corner of the

room to another. At one end is *a religion of right belief* (the importance of the teachings of the church, the creeds, and the atoning death of Jesus). At the other extreme is *a religion of right living* (the importance of a life of compassion, justice, and nonviolence based on the teachings of Jesus). For most people this is not a question of either/or. But most Christians tend to gravitate toward one polarity or the other as the focus of their religious life. Now, get up and stand along this imagined continuum to find the place where you believe you best fit. Take a few minutes to discuss why you chose your position with those around you. Now change the polarities to reflect whether the *life of Jesus* or *the death of Jesus* is more important to your religious life. Where do you stand? Now change the poles again to reflect the debate over whether the mission and message of Jesus was *salvation for a life after death* or about *personal and social transformation in this life*. Where do you stand?

8. The domination system emerged with the rise of civilization in the ancient near east. How does it manifest itself today?
9. Biblical scholar Walter Wink noted that the teachings of Jesus were a prescriptive remedy to the domination system of his time. Is that still true today? In what ways?
10. German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer described “cheap grace” as grace offered by the church without expecting a corresponding life of discipleship and commitment on the part of the sinner. What is the primary objective of your religious community: offering comfort or challenge?

Session 3: The Kingdom of God / A Conspiracy of Love

1. What have you previously regarded as the central message of Jesus?
2. How have you previously understood the meaning of “the Kingdom of God”?
3. How have you previously understood the phrase “the kingdom of Heaven”?
4. Has your definition of either changed after reading these chapters?
5. Do you think of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus was primarily future-oriented or present-oriented?
6. How is the Kingdom of God like a mustard seed tossed into a garden or like leaven in a large batch of dough? Is it about spectacular growth or quiet subversive action?
7. The author proposes that if “God is Love,” then the converse, “Love is God,” must also be true. Do you agree?
8. How does that impact or challenge your understanding of the nature of God? Is God a loving being, or is God love itself?
9. If God is not a supernatural being in heaven, how does Christian theology change?
10. How does that different understanding impact prayer and worship?

11. Does this understanding of God make a difference in how you live?

Session 4: The Prophetic Jesus / The Apocalyptic Christ

1. The author presents the life of Jesus in the context of first-century social upheaval, political domination, and economic exploitation. How did this shape the identity, mission, and message of Jesus? Who was he in his society? What did he want to accomplish? What was his key message to peasant listeners?
2. The author also proposes that Jesus led a movement for social change that was political in nature. Are you comfortable or uncomfortable with this portrait of Jesus?
3. The author claims that in the first century the terms "messiah" and "son of God" were political terms and not religious labels. Does that surprise you?
4. If the expectation was that the messiah / son of God would challenge Rome and local authorities to establish an earthly kingdom through armed rebellion, do those labels apply to Jesus before his execution? Will these labels apply if there is a second coming in the future?
5. How did the Apostle Paul reformulate the mission and message of Jesus?

Session 5: The Postmodern World / The Spiritual Journey

1. The Millennials (those born between 1982–2000) may be the first fully postmodern generation. Do you have any experience with their attitudes toward those who proclaim an absolute truth, including religious institutions and political authorities?
2. Do you think that Morris Massey's model of value development is valid? What events in your young adulthood helped shape your life and values?
3. The Baby Boom generation and their divided reactions to the war in Viet Nam created and cemented the culture wars in American life for the past half century. Recent presidents (Clinton, Bush, and Trump) are Baby Boomers. (Obama is from Generation X). Many older members of Congress are also Baby Boomers. Do you believe that the culture wars will subside as Baby Boomers die off, or are they here to stay?
4. How do you define spirituality? Does it involve a search for meaning?
5. Do you see a difference between religion and spirituality?
6. Do you think there is validity to the various models that describe spiritual growth as a series of stages in a person's faith journey?
7. Can you relate to the author's proposed stage descriptions?
 - a. religious conformity

- b. skeptical deconstruction
 - c. spiritual reformation
 - d. radical transformation
8. Which stage best applies to your life now? What about your children or grandchildren?
 9. Can spirituality be secular or must it always be religious?

Session 6: Cultural Nonconformity

1. How do you react to the author's explanation of the term "repent" as a calling to a whole new way of thinking and living?
2. Do you see a difference between belief and trust? Is there any difference between believing in Jesus and trusting Jesus?
3. How heavily does culture shape religious expression?
4. Do religious institutions usually support the status quo?
5. Do you think that God uses the United States as a divine instrument in the world? Was the nation fulfilling God's will during slavery or the conquest of native peoples?
6. Does God bless America more than God blesses other nations?
7. Does the status quo in the United States reflect a typical domination system?
 - a. unjust economic relations
 - b. biased race relations
 - c. patriarchal gender relations
 - d. hierarchical power relations
8. Comment on the following topics as part of the American character and culture today:
 - a. patriotism as nationalism and militarism
 - b. the idolatry of guns
 - c. the myth of redemptive violence
 - d. racism
 - e. the cult of rugged individualism
 - f. free market fundamentalism
 - g. the myth of consumerism
9. Does Jesus call us to live counter to our culture?
10. Which category best describes your relation to America's national culture: active conformist (cheerleader), passive conformist (silent supporter of status quo), passive non-conformist (cautious challenger), or active non-conformist (activist for change)?

Session 7: Bonhoeffer's Vision / Contemplation and Action

1. Do you see any parallels with Christianity in Germany of the 1930s and Christianity in the United States today?
2. Is Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms still valid today? Is the church called to stay out of the political realm?
3. What do you make of Bonhoeffer's writings in prison? Are we moving toward a completely religionless time? If so, where do you see examples of this?
4. Can Christianity survive without religious rites and ritual, doctrine and dogma?
5. Can Christianity survive without denominational institutions, dedicated church buildings, and clergy?
6. What new forms might connect the followers of Jesus if future generations no longer support church Christianity?
7. Is a life of contemplation (identifying with those who suffer) and action (working to achieve justice in an unjust world) apart from the life of the church still Christian?
8. Does God answer prayer like a *Deus ex machina* (*DAY-us eks MACK-in-ah*)? Or does God act only through us?
9. The author states that compassionate action usually takes three forms: charity, service, and justice. Which forms are most prevalent in the religious communities of your experience?

Session 8: The Ethics of Love / Agents of Love

1. Read Luke 3:1–14. Discuss John' the Baptizer's response to those who asked "What then shall we do?"
2. Is it true that without an ethic of love Christians can represent the worst humanity has to offer: rigid and intolerant, self-righteous and condemning, hate-filled and violent, selfish and unjust?
3. In the author's second book, *An Unorthodox Faith: A New Reformation for a Postmodern World*, he narrows the list of characteristics of following Jesus (pp. 219–221) and proposes that Jesus had nine key teachings that were central to his kingdom of God message.
 - a. Radical love
 - b. Lavish generosity
 - c. Extravagant forgiveness
 - d. Inclusive hospitality
 - e. Compassionate action
 - f. Selfless service
 - g. A passion for justice

- h. Creative nonviolence
 - i. Simple living
4. Do you think these actions represent the ethical response of Jesus? Are these the answers to the question “what then shall we do?”
 5. How are these ethical responses different than an absolute moral code?
 6. Can you think of examples in the gospels of where Jesus broke the holiness codes of his own religious tradition?
 7. Are the ethics of Jesus always situational or are they bound to an absolute morality?
 8. Does the ethic of “Do to others what you would have them do to you” transcend all religions? Is it a religious or secular statement?
 9. The author proposes that following Jesus is a response to his call to establish justice and peace in the world, making one a troublemaker, a (nonviolent) revolutionary, and a seeker of change. Do you agree?
 10. What would it mean to create a community around the nine key teaching of Jesus rather than the historic doctrines and teachings of the church? Would it change our common life together? Would it still be Christian?
 11. The author describes five aspects to living out the transformative vision of Jesus in our time (p.221). Do these tasks call to you?

Note: The following page can be printed as a handout for session 8.

the nine key teachings of Jesus

radical **love**

lavish **generosity**

extravagant **forgiveness**

inclusive **hospitality**

compassionate **action**

selfless **service**

a passion for **justice**

creative **nonviolence**

simple **living**

an unorthodox faith by Kurt Struckmeyer