

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Living the Questions*

by

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From its beginning, the Living the Questions curriculum has sought to expose participants to broad areas of thought around particular themes. While each chapter has a clearly stated focus, the goal is not necessarily to prove a point or make specific conclusions but to stir the pot and facilitate conversations.

Many of the topics in *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* are in a transitional stage and are pointing toward something new. How these ideas and this emerging vision develop will be determined through the efforts of those willing to live with the questions and see what unfolds along the way.

## CHAPTER 1: AN INVITATION TO JOURNEY

FOCUS: Faith is not a destination, but a journey.

1. How does Harrell Beck's statement "The beginning of true wisdom is asking the questions that have no answers" resonate with you?
2. Describe the advantages of being on a spiritual journey over "arriving" at the truth.
3. What are some of the defining characteristics of fundamentalism?
4. Where do you see fundamentalists of various faiths organizing themselves into political blocs?
5. How have "killing certainties" crippled the church's faithfulness to the gospel?
6. What role can ambiguity play in one's spiritual journey?
7. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 2: TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY

FOCUS: The authority one places in the Bible plays a critical role in one's worldview and understanding of the Christian life.

1. What are the possible consequences of an unquestioning belief in the ideas of Biblical inerrancy and infallibility?

2. Marcus Borg suggests that a more historical and metaphorical approach to the Bible provides a way for non-literalists to be Christian. How does this sync with your experience?
3. How might looking at the Bible as the “fourth member of the Trinity” border on idolatry?
4. Describe Borg’s stages of pre-critical naïveté, critical thinking, and post-critical naïveté.
5. Why does an awareness of the process by which the Bible came together matter?
6. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

### CHAPTER 3: THINKING THEOLOGICALLY

**FOCUS:** While family, education, social class, and geography all contribute to how we think about God, our experiences and perceptions along life’s journey also shape our thinking. Being comfortable with ambiguity, metaphor, and uncertainty helps us get the Divine “out of the box” and rethink theological ideas that have become barriers to our further spiritual growth.

1. How might embracing the Bible’s multiple theologies and various images of God facilitate one’s thinking theologically?
2. According to Winnie Varghese, what is the benefit of “thinking theologically”?

3. John Dominic Crossan asks four questions of twenty-first century Christians: What is the character of your God? What is the content of your faith? What is the function of your church? What is the purpose of your worship? Describe how you might have answered these questions as a child or young person compared to your understanding today.
4. According to John B. Cobb Jr., omnipotence is an unbiblical concept that misrepresents the nature of the Divine. Describe the advantages of seeing God as a persuasive, relational power over the unbiblical notion of omnipotent, coercive power.
5. What advantages can you identify in using alternatives to the word “God” to describe the Divine?
6. Consider a theological concept or tenet of conventional wisdom and describe how and why your thoughts on it have evolved over the years.
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 4: STORIES OF CREATION

**FOCUS:** How one perceives the creation stories is not only critical to the way one looks at the Bible, but how one understands the purpose of creation, the essence of human nature, and the attitude one takes toward the environment in which we live.

1. What are some of the purposes of creation stories in general?
2. What are some of the defining characteristics of the two creation stories in Genesis?
3. What are some of the ways a person's interpretation of the Genesis creation stories affects their worldview?
4. Barbara Rossing suggests that the false conflict between creation and evolution is distracting us from what we should really be spending our energies on. Discuss.
5. If the Genesis creation stories are about meaning, how might their literal interpretation compromise their intent?
6. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 5: LIVES OF JESUS

**FOCUS:** From divergent opinions on Jesus's "program" to the reasons for his having been killed, the many portrayals of Jesus in the gospels, various other traditions, theologies, and the arts amount to a Jesus who lived many different lives—each of which helps us in teasing out what it means to be a disciple of this mysterious and profoundly significant phenomenon called Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Why does the way Jesus is portrayed matter?

2. What are some ramifications of seeing the Gospels as part of “developing tradition”?
3. Describe some of the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John.
4. How is it that our stories of Jesus are true—but not historical?
5. Describe some of the layers Yvette Flunder bemoans as obscuring the real Jesus.
6. Why would the alternative vision of Jesus’s Kingdom be so treasonous or threatening?
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 6: A PASSION FOR CHRIST

**FOCUS:** Little of what most people think of as Christianity has been untouched by the legacy of Paul’s writing and influence. The many understandings of his interpretation of Christianity continue to be re-examined in the twenty-first century.

1. Discuss some of the ways Paul’s life and message have influenced Christianity.
2. Why is it important to have an awareness of what is authentic Paul and what is not?
3. Describe the attributes and purpose of what Crossan calls the “three different Pauls.”

4. The role of women is just one example of a teaching that is confused by later authors claiming Paul's authority. Explain.
5. Elaborate on how the concept of *pistis* being mistranslated as "faith *in* Jesus" (as opposed to the "faith *of* Jesus") has shaped Christianity as a whole.
6. In what ways can Paul's message ultimately be interpreted as one of hope?
7. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 7: OUT INTO THE WORLD

**FOCUS:** There is a reformation afoot in Christianity—a re-visioning of the traditional understandings of Jesus, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and the Christian life as a whole. Long-held ideas of divinity and of faith are changing and evolving to reflect twenty-first century thought and spirituality. Inspired by these fresh insights, progressive Christians can claim a distinctive voice by being in solidarity with the poor, countering the idolatry of wealth, practicing nonviolence, and by seeking justice and inclusivity in a culture dominated by fear.

1. Why is an embrace of the concepts of progress and change so vital to the future of Christianity?

2. How does your understanding of belief affect your spiritual journey?
3. What can you point to as core values of a progressive Christian message?
4. Discuss some of the possible consequences of recasting Christianity as a fluid and dynamic system of thought.
5. According to Brueggemann, what are the three definitive marks of the Church which have been kept “secret” and for which so many have been hungering?
6. What are some of the ways you imagine progressive Christianity “coming alive” in the twenty-first century?
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 8: RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS

**FOCUS:** There are three biblical “macro-stories” that shape the whole of the biblical narrative: Bondage and Liberation, Exile and Return, and Sin and Forgiveness. Each representing a different facet of the human condition, they demonstrate what is necessary for the restoration of relationships on a variety of levels.

1. Describe some of the characteristics of the Exodus story and how it speaks to the human need for liberation from bondage.



2. List some of the cultural messages that subject us to bondage.
3. Where do you see the “isms” and the bondage from which Minerva Carcaño feels liberated still at work today?
4. “Promised Land Theology” can be problematic for Canaanites. Explain.
5. Describe some of the characteristics of the story of the Babylonian exile and how it speaks to the human need for a return from exile.
6. How do the “Priestly” story and temple sacrifice speak to the human need for forgiveness from sin?
7. In what ways might the dominance of the “Priestly” story and the doctrine of the atonement diminish the broader Biblical message?
8. Culver “Bill” Nelson claims that Jesus was against the sacrificial system of the temple cult in Jerusalem. Explain.
9. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 9: THE PROPHETIC JESUS

**FOCUS:** Jesus was a troublemaker. He said and did things that were upsetting to agents of the political and religious domination systems that oppressed the weak and downtrodden. In this

way, Jesus stood firmly in the tradition of the prophets of Hebrew Scripture—those who offered a clear and challenging “alternative script” to the status quo.

1. Describe some of the basic characteristics and passions expressed by the prophets of Hebrew scripture.
2. How do anger and righteous indignation play into the expression of a prophetic voice?
3. How are some of the characteristics of the “radical community” Jesus inaugurated still a threat today?
4. What are some of the ways Jesus’s message threatens *your* status quo?
5. Compare and contrast the strategies of Clarence Jordan and Dorothy McRae-McMahon with that of the institutional church.
6. According to Yvette Flunder, it is essential for the “personal piety piece” and “justice work” to be brought together. Explain.
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 10: EVIL, SUFFERING, AND A GOD OF LOVE

FOCUS: If God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-good, how do you explain and respond to the existence of so much suffering and evil in the world?

1. Reflect on the Robert McAfee Brown quote, “Whatever the status of evil in the world, I know that the only God in whom I can believe will be a God found in the midst of evil rather than at a safe distance from it; suffering the evil rather than inflicting it.”
2. What explanations have you heard offered through the years for the existence of evil?
3. How might the idea of the Divine participating with us—even in our suffering—affect our understanding of God?
4. Why are so many of the popular but unbiblical ideas of Satan and Hell so beloved by so many?
5. What do you think was at the core of the hoopla around Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*?
6. In the face of suffering and evil, what are our options?
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 11: THE MYTH OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE

**FOCUS:** The most potent religion in Western culture is not Christianity, but a belief in the redemptive power of violence. Although Jesus inaugurated a new order based on partnership, equality, compassion, and nonviolence, his example and teachings have been eclipsed by an emphasis on a human unworthi-

ness that demands and defends the need for Jesus's violent, suffering, atoning death.

1. Describe Walter Wink's notion of "The Myth of Redemptive Violence."
2. What are some of the ways you see violence integrated into our culture and popular Christianity?
3. The idea of Original Sin has spawned multiple theories of atonement. Discuss the theory that best describes your upbringing and where you are now.
4. What was Anselm's rationale for "coming up with" substitutionary atonement?
5. In what ways do ideas like Original Blessing and Satyagraha serve as a corrective to our confusing hodgepodge of atonement theories?
6. What are some of the thoughts Spong suggests as alternatives to the image of "Jesus, the Divine Invader" dying for our sins?
7. What options do twenty-first century Christians have in countering our collective infatuation with the myth of redemptive violence?
8. What are the implications of Christians actually practicing nonviolence?
9. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 12: PRACTICING RESURRECTION

**FOCUS:** While much has been made of Jesus's literal and physical resurrection being the core historical event of Christianity, the biblical texts themselves present conflicting evidence. For many today, the resuscitation of Jesus's body is less important than the idea of resurrection as a credible and meaningful principle for living.

1. What evidence points to the physical resurrection of Jesus being a legendary, late-developing tradition?
2. What does the idea of resurrection have to do with life after death (if anything)?
3. When considering Jesus's death and resurrection, how might the notion of the spirit of Jesus dwelling in us strengthen us for new life in the here and now?
4. According to Winnie Varghese, how does the resurrection support the work God calls us to do?
5. How is "the expenditure of our life for the community" a form of the resurrected life?
6. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 13: DEBUNKING THE RAPTURE

**FOCUS:** Failing to understand the message of hope offered in the Book of Revelation, many Christians have been misled by

nineteenth-century doomsayers and modern-day apocalyptic preachers who proclaim their vengeful god's impending extermination of the apostate masses. Just what part of "love your enemies" doesn't their god understand?

1. What are some of the major ideas promoted by John Nelson Darby's theology and the Scofield Reference Bible?
2. Why is it important to counter the fictional biblical timelines of the rapture cult?
3. Theologically and psychologically, what does the rapture mentality foster?
4. How does the vision of violent apocalypse sync with the character and priorities of the Jesus represented in the Gospels?
5. Discuss John Dominic Crossan's claim regarding our "great Christian treason."
6. Of the possible elements of the "different story" Rossing sees a need for, what resonates with you?
7. If Jesus doesn't come to us through violence, death, war, and disaster, where will we find him?
8. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 14: HONORING CREATION

**FOCUS:** While human beings have been gifted with a beautiful and complex world in which to live, its systems and resources are being stressed by our behaviors, lifestyles, and arrogance. Care for the environment is not only deeply biblical and practical, but increasingly critical—for both the present spiritual life and for our collective future.

1. In what ways might the expression “praying with open eyes” promote a deeper spirituality?
2. What are some of the consequences of “anthropocentric arrogance”?
3. What could our diet possibly have to do with the wider creation?
4. Reflect on the implications of so much environmental destruction occurring while Christian nations have been at the apex of control.
5. How does being “compassionate as God is compassionate” relate to creation?
6. What does Aquinas’s definition of salvation have to do with your daily interaction with creation?
7. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 15: A KINGDOM WITHOUT WALLS

**FOCUS:** The good news of the gospel tells of a radical hospitality where boundaries, barriers, and walls are overcome by a grace that knows no bounds.

1. In what ways are our prejudices and insecurities intertwined?
2. When you consider C. S. Lewis's sentiment: "Can you think of a type of person who might make you uncomfortable if they sat next to you? May that person come into your life soon," who comes to mind?
3. Besides the tax collector, the woman with the hemorrhage, the synagogue leader, and the woman at the dinner party, what other stories depict Jesus crossing barriers that separate people?
4. Share what role the practice of hospitality plays in your own life or the life of your faith community.
5. Describe the "humanity beyond our prejudices" to which we are called.
6. What are some of the rigid rules and theological walls that you've encountered in your spiritual journey?
7. At its 2012 General Conference, the United Methodist Church voted to retain discriminatory language against homosexuals in its *Book of Discipline*. Give other examples of entrenched systemic injustice and what rights groups have done/are doing to foster change.



8. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 16: SOCIAL JUSTICE

**FOCUS:** Being a person of faith demands balancing spiritual pursuits with action. In a society that is often unjust, inequitable, and whose very structures are responsible for generating untold suffering and poverty, we are compelled to pursue social justice as an expression of hope in realizing a better world.

1. What are some of the characteristics of “prophetic theology”?
2. Compare and contrast personal/individual justice and systemic or structural justice.
3. What are the implications of people of faith being aware of the notion of “systemic justice”?
4. How does Jesus's call to liberation and justice conflict with the values of the dominant culture then and now?
5. How does fixating on the “virtue of individuals” legitimate the social structure?
6. What breaks your heart about your world or the system by which it's organized? Reflect on something you could do to create a first ripple.

7. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 17: INCARNATION

**FOCUS:** The meaning of the incarnation has been debated since the beginning of Christianity. Although often associated with Jesus alone, the notion of incarnation can be understood most fully when it also includes Jesus's followers, called, like Jesus, to en flesh the Spirit in divinely human ways.

1. With whom does Jesus share the claim of miraculous birth? Why?
2. Why was the virgin birth story an honest mistake?
3. As the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can't possibly be historical, what is their purpose?
4. In what ways do Brandon Scott, Robin Meyers, and Diana Butler Bass believe the creeds have distorted Christianity?
5. What are the implications for your faith of simply embracing Jesus as a human being?
6. How would re-imagining "God as the life power itself, the power of love itself" change our understanding of incarnation?
7. How does process theology make sense of the incarnation?

8. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 18: PRAYER

**FOCUS:** The idea of prayer as the primary method of interaction with God is best thought of as a way of life rather than an activity reserved for specific times, places, and formulas.

1. Describe ways in which prayer can be distorted.
2. John Shelby Spong relates a story regarding prayer for his wife. What stands out for you in this story?
3. If prayer isn't a direct and effective way of influencing the Divine for our own benefit, what good is it?
4. How does Capon's "tow truck theology" and "covenant of presence" resonate with your experience?
5. Rick Ufford-Chase finds prayer expressed in conversation, play, and even reading the comics. What forms can you see prayer taking?
6. What place do words have when trying to "authentically listen" or achieve the silence of "deep knowing"?
7. What effect does the idea of prayer being legitimately different for people and changing over time have on your spiritual journey?

8. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 19: COMPASSION

FOCUS: Jesus was not primarily a teacher of correct beliefs or right morals. He was a teacher of a way that transforms people from legalistic rule followers into compassionate disciples who put people first.

1. How does the holiness code practiced in Jesus's day conflict with the notion of compassion?
2. What insights do Prejean and McLaren offer to your understanding of compassion?
3. Jesus a law-breaker? Explain.
4. Discuss the varying forms of compassion Minerva Carcaño describes.
5. How does the very definition of the word compassion deepen its meaning for you?
6. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is presented a choice between turning in his best friend or continuing to aid and abet a runaway slave. In Twain's masterful scene, Huck tears up the note he'd written to Jim's master (explaining the slave's whereabouts) and exclaims, "Alright then, I'll go to hell." What examples can you think of when you or others have been compelled to disobey a law in order to do the right thing?

7. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 20: CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

**FOCUS:** The essence of human nature is to take part in the dynamic and imaginative process of creation—transforming us, our relationships, our institutions, and our world.

1. What are some examples of “cosmetic piety” with which you’ve wrestled?
2. Discuss some of the barriers to transformation practiced by the institution.
3. Megan McKenna describes how storytelling is not for the conveying of information, for confirmation of what you know, or comfort in what you believe, but for “unlearning” and transformation. Explain.
4. Name some of the ways creative works and creativity itself are tied to wisdom.
5. How does the following ring true for you? “The spirituality many are seeking is not to the left or to the right, but deeper.”
6. What are the implications of this chapter's theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?

## CHAPTER 21: EMBRACING MYSTERY

**FOCUS:** Christian practice is being revisioned, retooled, and reclaimed by those who are living the questions of their faith. They're attentive to ancient ways, comfortable with ambiguity, and open to the unknowable and indescribable mystery of the Divine.

1. List some of the ways bringing back the sense of mystery can call us beyond our knowing into an exploration of the Holy.
2. How would acknowledging that “we dwell in mystery” affect one’s day-to-day outlook on the world?
3. Culver “Bill” Nelson recounts Rabbi Heschel claiming that there’s no distinction between the sacred and the secular. How have you found this to be true in your own experience?
4. In what ways do you see the embrace of mystery benefiting your spiritual journey?
5. What are the implications of this chapter’s theme for your personal spiritual journey? For your local faith community? For Christianity as a whole?