

Group Study Guide for

***Practices***  
***Mennonite Work and Witness***

by John D. Roth

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See also **Practices** in the MPN online catalog.

**Introduction**

- Roth writes of his experience with spiritual malaise and his hunger for God (pp. 11–12). Where have you experienced spiritual hunger in your life?
- Similarly, Roth suggests that the Mennonite Church is trying to find its way, seeking renewal, often through new forms of worship (p. 13). Where have you seen this search in your own community?
- How do you respond to Roth’s five basic assumptions?
- Do you agree with Roth’s assertion that worship and mission should not, and cannot, be separated (p. 22)?
- Do you see these as separate in your church’s understanding and practice?

**Chapter 1**

- Do you find Roth’s water imagery (pp. 32–34) for our relationship with culture compelling? Why or why not?
- What deep cultural currents do you see at work in your community?
- Discuss the five cultural currents that Roth identifies (pp. 34–39). Do you agree with Roth’s analysis? Would there be other cultural trends that you might add to the conversation?
- On p. 36, Roth discusses the fragmentation of our society. Do you experience this fragmentation in your life? How have you found ways to creatively resist this fragmentation?
- Roth notes the distinction between traditional village values and our notions of “global village” today (p. 37). Where do you experience truly knowing others and truly being known? How might your church nurture values of relationship and wisdom?

**Chapter 2**

- In this chapter, Roth outlines the different positions that early Christians took on Jesus and his identity as both divine and human. Do you tend to be drawn to one understanding of Jesus over the other? How does your church seek to hold the divinity and humanity of Jesus together?
- The writers of the New Testament used various images to describe the saving power of Jesus: sacrifice, redemption, moral example, and victory over evil. Discuss the differences between these understandings. Do you or does your church tend to focus on one of these images over others? Why?

- Roth points to the authority of Jesus as a central tenet of the Anabaptist tradition. He argues that if the incarnation is true Christians must reject reducing Jesus to a moral exemplar as well as assuming that all religions basically point to the same general truth (p. 55). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Belief in the incarnation has significant implications for how we see and treat the created world (p. 56). How might reflecting on the incarnation shape your relationship with the natural world?
- On p. 59, Roth suggests that the Anabaptists were convinced that the body of Christ is visible in the community of believers who put their loyalty to Christ above all other allegiances. How do you express your loyalty to Christ?

### Chapter 3

- If you had been in conversation with the young person Roth describes (p. 61), how would you have described the importance of worship? Why does going to church matter?
- Roth identifies four themes that identify why worship should be central for all Christians. What are these four themes? What is your response? Do you find them compelling?
- On p. 69, Roth suggests that worship is a political act? What does he mean by this? Do you agree?
- Roth also argues that worship helps us resist the influence of “false friends” (p. 71) by teaching us to see the world truthfully. What or who are the false friends that hold sway in your life? How does worship offer you an alternative vision?
- The early church struggled with division between Jews and Gentiles. What divisions does the church face today (local, Mennonite, global)? Could worship be a part of healing these divisions?

### Chapter 4

- What does the term *practices* mean (p. 85)? Why does Roth see practices as central to Christian formation?
- Roth sees an approach to ethics as being primarily rooted in worship (p. 92). How have you experienced the transforming power of worship in your life?
- How do you understand the relationship between God’s grace and the life of Christian discipleship? What does your experience of grace lead you to do?
- Roth suggests that practices of worship are inevitably missional (p. 95). What are some examples of this in your church and community?

### Chapter 5

- What have you learned about the body from Christianity? How has the church shaped your understanding of the “embodied soul”?
- Roth writes that our culture is at war with our bodies (p. 106) and uses our relationship with food, beauty, intimacy, and death as examples. Do you agree with this analogy? Where do you see this “war” being fought in your own life?
- Roth writes that “singing nurtures us for Christian witness” (p. 112). Is this a new way of seeing the act of singing for you? How does Roth’s reflection on congregational singing resonate with your experience?

- Roth makes a powerful argument for the importance of footwashing (pp. 113–115). Why does he see this ritual as an important part of Christian worship? Does your church community regularly share in footwashing? Why or why not?
- How else does Roth imagine the incarnation influencing our common practices? Are there other places where you see the divine image of God being honored in the church?

## **Chapter 6**

- For the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, our allegiance to Christ marks our church as “our first family” (p. 130). Is this true for you? In our modern society with its emphasis on the small, nuclear family, do churches really function as our primary family?
- Roth discusses a number of points in relation to the family in the Anabaptist context (pp. 132–133); his final point is that “genealogy is not destiny; it is a gift.” What role does genealogy play in the Mennonite church today? How do we balance the open invitation of Christ to all while also valuing familial identity and history?
- Roth also suggests that the Christian family bear witness to the mystery of the Trinity (p. 140). What does this mean? What examples of this witness are you aware of in your community?
- What role does confession play in your experience of church and family? Do you agree with Roth that confession is essential to our experience of liberating forgiveness in the family (and beyond)?

## **Chapter 7**

- Roth suggests that the Anabaptist-Mennonite approach to missions assumes that the content of the message is inseparable from how the gospel is lived (p. 150). Do you see this in your church? What examples does Roth point to? Others you would add?
- How does keeping the Sabbath form us as Christians (pp. 157–159)? How is this also a witness to the world?
- How do you respond to Roth’s thoughts on prayer (pp. 162–164)? Do you agree that the posture of prayer is the most formational aspect of prayer for us?
- In considering the relationship of the church with the larger world, Roth suggests that it is not the church’s perfection but the church’s confession that marks its difference (p. 166). Is this a new idea for you? How have you traditionally understood the difference between the church and the world?

## **Chapter 8**

- Roth encourages us to consider how our spaces for worship affect our experience, and how our theology shapes our structures. Reflect on your congregation’s worship space. Can you see your church’s theological beliefs being expressed in your surroundings?
- Roth succinctly outlines some of the theological themes present during various periods of Christian architecture (pp. 175–181). What do you appreciate about buildings from other Christian traditions? Do you agree with the early Anabaptists’ critique of medieval cathedrals?
- How have conversations about space gone in your community? Does your church consider its building as one part of how it bears witness in the world?

## **Chapter 9**

- Discuss the differences between traditional Catholic and Anabaptist understandings of the sacraments (pp. 195–198). Is there anything for us to learn from the Catholic tradition on this point?
- Roth raises a number of important problems in our Anabaptist theology with regard to baptism and communion (pp. 199–200). Do you agree with his critique? Why or why not?
- Consider the theology of Pilgram Marpeck that Roth outlines (pp. 201–204). Do you understand the distinction between traditional Anabaptist theology and Marpeck’s approach? What does it mean for the water, bread, and wine to be “essential to the Spirit’s transformative presence in worship” (202)?
- Respond to Roth’s suggestions for how the church might renew our understanding of the Spirit’s presence in worship (pp. 204–210). How does your community celebrate baptism and the Lord’s Supper? Do you see new possibilities in Roth’s offerings?

## **Chapter 10**

- What role does beauty play in your life of faith? In your church?
- Roth writes that “beauty is the true foundation of Christian witness” (p. 219). What does he mean? Do you agree? How might this statement shift your understanding of Christian discipleship?