

Beliefs by John D. Roth

Group Study Guide by Karl R. Landis

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Preface

- Why is the postmodern approach to religion described on page 12 unsatisfactory for most Christians? (p. 12)
- Do you find the postmodern approach or the Christian approach that the author describes more compelling? Why do you find that approach more compelling?
- How would you answer the author's question – "What, if anything, about the Christian faith can be communicated authentically to the people we encounter?" (p. 12)
- The author says, "[Mennonites] seek to live now the kind of redeemed life that Christians anticipate everyone will live in the fullness of time." Do you agree or disagree that this is possible? What reasons can you give for your position? (p. 14, also see p. 50-51)

Chapter 1: Christian Foundations: What Mennonites Believe

- Why do you think I Corinthians 3:11 has been a favorite verse of Mennonites ever since the writings of Menno Simons? (p. 23, if you get stuck, also see p. 45).
- Were you surprised to learn that Mennonites believe all seven of the doctrines listed on p. 21-25? If yes, which ones were you surprised to find on the list?
- Why were the early Anabaptists not completely satisfied with the Apostles Creed? (p. 25, also see p. 72)

Chapter 2: Christian Foundations: How Mennonites Believe

- Why are doctrinal statements "a necessary but insufficient way of describing the essence of the Christian faith" for Mennonites? (p. 28-29)
- Why do Mennonites think it is wrong (or perhaps impossible) to trick or force someone into the Christian faith? (p. 30-33)

- Name at least one benefit and one problem that have resulted from “the absence of a clear hierarchy of leadership or absolutely fixed statements of doctrine” among Mennonites. (p. 33)

Chapter 3: Interpreting Scripture: Through a Mennonite Lens

- What did Luther believe about the truth of the Bible during the earliest phase of the Reformation? What problem did he discover as the ideas of the Reformation developed and spread? (p. 40-41)
- What three characteristics of an earnest seeker would Mennonites look for to be assured that such a person would not return empty-handed from a study of the Scriptures? (p. 43)
- How would you explain a “Christocentric reading of scripture” in one or two sentences of your own words? (p. 44)
- What does it mean for the congregation to be attentive to both the external word of Scripture and the inner movement of the Spirit? (p. 47)

Chapter 4: Interpreting Scripture: A Critique...and Ongoing Questions

- How has Mennonite theology tempted Mennonites toward legalism? (p. 50, also see p. 29-30)
- Why do some people think the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are essentially different beings? Why do you agree or disagree with them? (p. 52)
- In what ways does your congregation function as an “interpretive community?” (p. 54, also see p. 43)
- What problems may emerge if a congregation does not function very well as an interpretive community? (p. 54, also see p. 43)

Chapter 5: Believers Baptism: Choosing Our King

- What political change in the fifth century prompted the separation of personal repentance and baptism? (p. 64)
- What theological development shifted most Christians’ focus from the baptism of adults to the baptism of infants? (p. 64)

- Why did the Anabaptists think Christians should return to the practice of baptizing only adults? (p. 66-67)
- Why did Anabaptists describe the meaning of baptism as being like a three-stranded cord? What did each “strand” represent? Why do you agree or disagree with this view? (p. 67-69)
- How might it change our understanding of the atonement if we focus on the resurrection rather than the cross as the central theme of the atonement? (p. 71-72)

Chapter 6: Believers Baptism: A Critique...and Ongoing Questions

- What would you say to someone raised in the Catholic Church, but now attending your church, who is uneasy about not baptizing her baby? (p. 75, also see p. 64) Are there any scriptures that speak to this question?
- Why do some Lutherans and Presbyterians see believer baptism as a potential barrier to relying on God’s grace for our salvation? Why do you agree or disagree that this is a problem? (p. 77)
- From a Mennonite perspective, what are the benefits and problems with baptizing a child who is nine or ten years old? (p. 78-79, also see p. 67-69)
- What does the author mean when he says, “Baptism, like faith, always has a universal as well as a particular meaning to it”? (p. 81)
- Why have Mennonites historically expected people baptized as infants to be rebaptized when they join the Mennonite church? (p. 82, also see p. 67-69)
- Based on the Mennonite understanding of baptism, under what circumstances would you agree with this approach? Under what circumstances would you disagree with it?

Chapter 7: Faith as Discipleship: Christian Practices in the Mennonite Tradition I

- Do you find the Mennonite view or the Catholic view more compelling with regard to who should aspire to meet the high standards Jesus set for thoughts and behaviors? What scriptures can you cite in support of your answer? (p. 87-89)
- What does it mean to say that “human weakness allow(s) the presence of God to be fully revealed”? (p. 90) Does this remind you of any scripture verses other than Luke 10:19?
- What two crucial points are frequently misunderstood regarding Christian discipleship? (p. 91)

- How would you explain the Mennonite understanding of stewardship in one or two sentences of your own words? (p. 94, 97, 101)

Chapter 8: Faith as Discipleship: Christian Practices in the Mennonite Tradition II

- Which, if any, of the five statements on sexuality did you object to? Why did you object? (p. 101-103)
- Are any of the five statements controversial in your congregation? Would any of them be controversial in your local community? If yes, which ones, and why would they be controversial? (p. 101-103)
- What difference does the resurrection make for the Mennonite understanding of true power? (104-105, 107)
- What does the author give as the main reason Mennonites are committed to loving our enemies? (p. 104-106)
- In what ways is the Mennonite understanding of peacemaking both profoundly spiritual and profoundly political? (p. 107)
- How has the Mennonite understanding of peacemaking sometimes been spiritualized or politicized? (p. 106-107)
- What connections do you see between cultivating the practice of service (p. 109) and loving our enemies (p. 105-106)? How do they both express the gospel of peace? (p. 109, also see p. 14, 50-51)

Chapter 9: Faith as Discipleship: A Critique...and Ongoing Questions

- In your own life, have you struggled more with trusting in “cheap grace” or in your own good behavior as the means for being reconciled with God? Explain the problem with each of these approaches in your own words. (p. 112)
- Why might someone think Mennonites are parasites on the civil order? Do you think we are? On what basis might a Mennonite answer “no” to this question? (p. 113, also see p. 104-107)
- Why might someone think Mennonites are naïve about the reality of evil? Do you think we are? On what basis might a Mennonite say we are not naïve about the reality of evil? (p. 114-115, also see p. 104-107)
- Who in your congregation or community does the best job of emphasizing the need for personal faith and high moral standards on the one hand and the need to care for the

needs of the poor and downtrodden on the other hand? (p. 115-116)

- Assuming that your country is not the same thing as the kingdom of God, how might you and others in your church appropriately express your patriotism (your love for your country)? Or do you think any expression of love for your country is inappropriate? (p. 117-118)
- How does a call to live a simple, less expensive way of life combine the Mennonite understanding of stewardship (see p. 92-95, 104, 107) and our compassion for the poor and downtrodden (see p. 97, 109)? (p.118)

Chapter 10: *The Visible Church: Commitment and Worship*

- What do Mennonites mean by a “two kingdom” view of the world? (p. 126-127, 140, 142-143) Why might a critic see this view as too dualistic (i.e., too black and white)? (p. 147-149)
- What problems do you see with maintaining a “two kingdom” view of the world? What problems do you see with discarding such a view?
- Why have Mennonites traditionally avoided elaborate, formal, or highly structured approaches to worship? Why have Mennonite forms of worship tended to be rather informal and to include the involvement of the congregation? (p. 128-131, 149)

Chapter 11: *The Visible Church: Practices that Shape Community*

- What are the eight different meanings the Lord’s Supper (communion) has had for Mennonites? (p. 133-134)
- What three aspects of our salvation does celebrating the Lord’s Supper remind us about? (p. 135)
- How is mutual aid linked to the Mennonite understanding of what it means to be the church? (p. 136, 142-143)
- When insurance was introduced by the financial services industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Mennonites generally agreed that it would be wrong for them to buy insurance. Can you use the Mennonite understanding of mutual aid (p. 136) and the two kingdom view of the world (p. 126, 142-143) to make a case against Christians buying insurance? Why do you or do you not find this case compelling?
- Why did the early Anabaptists say that “a church without discipline...might just as well baptize babies”? (p. 137-140, 142-143)

- Based in the Mennonite understanding of church discipline, what do you think it says about our churches that we practice very little church discipline any more? (p. 137, 142-143, 151-152)
- Why do you think Mennonites have been so excited to discover the exhortation to “Preach the gospel always, use words if necessary.”? (p. 109, 141-142)
[Note: This phrase is often incorrectly attributed to St Francis of Assisi. It does not appear anywhere in his writings or sayings.]

Chapter 12: The Visible Church: A Critique...and Ongoing Questions

- Why might someone think the Mennonite understanding of the separation of church and state is simply irresponsible? Do you think it is? On what basis might a Mennonite say this view is not irresponsible? (p. 145-147)
- Some Mennonites have argued that we should no longer bother with being a separate denomination, that we should be content to be Christians without any particular denominational label. Why do you agree or disagree with that view? (p. 154-156)
- What would we gain and what would we lose by disbanding Mennonite congregations and the Mennonite denomination in order to join other congregations and denominations? (p. 154-156)

Chapter 13: An Invitation: Mennonites in the (post)Modern World

- How does the author summarize the Mennonite understanding of the Christian faith? (p. 158)
- Why do you think people today find the pursuit of a life of pleasure so appealing? What problems result from this way of thinking? What is the author’s suggestion for how Christians ought to respond to this sort of thinking? (p. 162)
- Why do you think people today find giving up altogether so appealing? What problems result from this way of thinking? What is the author’s suggestion for how Christians ought to respond to this sort of thinking? (p. 164)
- Why do you think people today find resorting to coercion and violence so appealing? What problems result from this way of thinking? What is the author’s suggestion for how Christians ought to respond to this sort of thinking? (p. 166-167)