

MEGAN K. WESTRA

**BORN
AGAIN
and AGAIN**

**JESUS' CALL TO
RADICAL TRANSFORMATION**

STUDY GUIDE BY KATIE BALFANY



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HOW I “GOT SAVED”

THEMES:

- Attempting to share the Gospel verbally without the presence of love and action is empty (and awkward).
- If you believe that the ultimate fear is going to hell and the ultimate gift is eternal salvation, that can have some weird effects on how you practice your faith here on earth in the meantime.
- Salvation is more of a continuous journey than an emotional, one-time experience.
- Our practices matter to our faith.
- “Our stories matter to our faith” (p.23).

1. How were the concepts of heaven, hell, and salvation introduced to you? How did you feel about these ideas? Did you question or embrace them?
2. On page 14, Westra describes “the rushing joy, the excitement about God, the need to tell people how good God is...” saying “I definitely felt saved now.” Have you ever “felt saved” like this? How much do we attribute our salvation to the strength of our feelings toward God?
3. In your view, what is the relationship between the Gospel and “the soul of our nation” (p. 15)? How has your understanding of this relationship changed over time?
4. How does a faith of “religion” differ from a faith of “relationship” (p.17)?
5. As questions and doubts have welled up in your own journey of faith, have you tended toward throwing yourself more deeply into Christian activities or walking away?
6. Do you relate with Westra’s experiences trying to “make disciples in six weeks’ time”? Have you been part of a conversation guided by a “little blue book” (p.18) or a similar tool for evangelism? What was your experience with it?
7. Have you ever been saved and not known it “until years later” (p. 20)? Reflect on that experience.
8. “Orthodoxy—right beliefs—requires orthodoxy—right practices, or living, and vice versa” (p.22). Are you reading this book today with a readiness to explore and even change the practical ways you live out your beliefs?
9. “Our stories matter for our faith” (p.23. Who are the storytellers in your own life? Where did you hear the stories that have most shaped you?

2

YOU'RE INVITED

Reimagining Personal Salvation

THEMES:

- Personal salvation, selective liberation, and authoritative interpretation of scripture are not rooted in ancient precedence but rather in early colonial Christians' practices.
- The idea of having a personal God allows us, as it did the early colonizers, to ignore inequities of power and to commit harm against our neighbors.
- Being "arena folks" (p.33) is markedly more difficult than having a private faith because it requires genuine engagement with wildly diverse types of people and their experiences. However, this way of being "arena folks" also most closely resembles Jesus' way.
- Our faith should holistically impact the way we live in public together.

1. Have you encountered the "invitation to selective liberation" or, in other words, the promise of freedom with "a hidden asterisk" (p.27)?
2. Does your own story fit more into "a radical story of life change" or "a remarkably boring joy ride on the highway opposite of hell" (p. 28)?
3. Did your childhood history classes highlight the early colonizers' search for "religious freedom" and "religious tolerance"? When were you first introduced to more accurate portrayals of early settlers' religious intolerance?
4. What parallels do you draw between the early churches of the colonies and churches today? Are congregations today "places of communal discernment" (p.30)? Is your own?
5. How did the early Christians both "rebel against the monarchy for being exploitative while at the same time enslaving their neighbors or stealing their neighbor's land" (p.31)?

6. Describe "arena folks" (p.33). How do they look, act, speak, and love? Name examples of "arena folks" in your own life.
7. On page 34, Westra writes:

What would happen if our faith communities and church congregations adopted the same practice of pausing to listen to how our actions affect—intentionally or not—those whose lives are devalued by society at large? Those whose racial, sexual, or gender identity has barred them from the doors of so many congregations? Those whose education level or lack of financial resources has made them seem lesser? Those whose disability has been seen as a liability? Those whose age has made them too young to be considered wise or too old to be considered relevant? What if we choose to connect with, rather than consume, one another?

In your own words, answer these questions. What *would* happen if churches chose connection over consumption? Have you seen this modeled well?

3

CONNECTION OVER CONSUMPTION:

Expanding Our View of Salvation

THEMES:

- Salvation is deeply personal, as God comes to each of us in our particular context and identity.
 - Overemphasizing the personal nature of salvation leads us to prioritize our individual performance and neglect to take part in communal movements for justice. Both tendencies are incompatible with the witness of Scripture.
 - Belonging to a community and practicing love as neighbors enables us to understand salvation as a similarly ongoing relationship rather than a transaction.
 - White evangelicals have long wielded power in America, often in contradiction to Christ's ways. "Christianity emerged as a religion of outsiders under persecution" (p. 47) and as such, we must learn from the witness of those in similar social positions today.
1. God's love is often quite swiftly recognized by people who find that God sees and *knows them* personally. The stories of Zaccheus, the woman at the well, Hagar, the widow of Zarephath, and the Ethiopian eunuch are a few examples of how God shows up to people in ways particular to them (p.38). Why is this significant?
 2. What identity, context, and experiences do you bring to your study of the Bible? Do you consciously recognize and contemplate these, or do you often attempt to leave them "at the door" (p.39)?
 3. Compare a Jesus "who lives in your heart" to a Jesus who commands you to "pick up your cross and follow" (p. 40).
 4. Have you always seen God as one "who is intimately concerned with the common life of people" (p.43)? Why or why not?
 5. In your own words, define "faithful public witness" (p.46). How do you identify false or empty witness, such as the dissonant behaviors Westra lists on page 44?
 6. Consult the list of recommended reading on pages 157-158. Are you familiar with any of these works? If so, what did you learn from them? Is there one you might commit to reading next?

4

THE AUTHORITIES ARE GOD'S SERVANTS

Connection over Consumption in Politics

THEMES:

- As followers of Christ, we must engage politically in order to contend for a more equitable, just, and Kingdom-like world.
- American evangelicals did not always practice the broad support for our government we see from it today, but fervent patriotism among evangelicals grew during the two world wars, largely out of fears of communism and collectivism, and in part through narratives constructed by business interests.
- The Bible does not give one clear mandate about positions toward government, but provides strong evidence for resisting unjust political systems and actively building a more equitable and beautiful world.
- Our public witness should look like voting, learning about our neighborhoods, listening to the marginalized, writing to officials, speaking out, offering our resources, and showing up to put our own bodies on the line for the sake of others.

1. What connotations does the term “politics” have in your mind? In your church or community? What about in your family?
2. How did patriotism become such a key characteristic of American evangelicalism?
3. “The collapsed matrix that equated American with Christian with capitalist compelled them to support the war not only on political grounds, but as a moral and religious imperative” (p. 54). In addition to support for the Vietnam War, what other social or political positions, in history or today, seem to result from this “collapsed matrix”?
4. What do our scriptures have to say about governmental authority and political resistance (pp.55-57)? What interpretations have you previously been taught?
5. On pages 59 and 60, Ben Swihart shows us a picture of discipleship through direct action. What compels or prevents the Church from showing up “to block and destroy the pipelines that are poisoning our water” or “at the border with food and water” (p. 60) or to join a direct action at your own town’s city hall?
6. Reflect on your own experiences with direct actions.
7. What are some ways we can personally engage with the political systems that affect us and our neighbors?
8. How does social privilege affect our perspective and impact where we should begin in our political action (pp. 61-62)?
9. What are some ways congregations can engage together for the sake of our communities? How might you play a role moving your own church toward this type of faithful public witness?

5

WE ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST, SEPARATELY PLEASE

Connection over Consumption in Relationships across Race

THEMES

- While American children are indoctrinated to believe that the US is free and just, it doesn't take long to notice that some of our neighbors do not experience a liberated life and just treatment.
- The earliest colonizers, emboldened by power and warped theology, began building racist power structures that persist today, murdering the image of God on this continent.
- Scripture addresses our imaginary concept of race through a multitude of stories that quash the legitimacy of prejudice based on social status or ethnicity.
- All of us living within racist systems internalize oppressive lies about ourselves and others, but we each have particular work to do to uncover and unlearn—or *decolonize*—the lies of white supremacy as we seek to conform to Christ.
- In the wake of historic and ongoing racism, true repentance and reconciliation necessitates more than just diversifying our congregations; it requires deep learning, public truth-telling, and real action, both personally and communally.

1. Did you recite the Pledge of Allegiance in your classrooms? If so, did you think much about it then?
2. When did you first begin to question the reality of “liberty and justice for all” in the U.S.?
3. From the earliest colonies to present day, racist and unjust structures are based on “the belief that European men are more godlike than anyone else” (p.70). How do power structures, whether in government or the church, reinforce themselves?
4. Why doesn't the Bible directly address race? What concepts, closely tied to race, does scripture often discuss?
5. Irene Cho, Michelle Higgins, and Karen Gonzales share about their liberative journeys away from stereotypes, social norms, and oppressive theologies they've experienced (pp. 76-80). Highlight parts of their testimonies which particularly resonate with you. What important questions do these women teach us to ask?
6. On page 81, Karen Gonzales shares: “Throughout my journey of faith, I've had to unlearn not only the idea that Jesus was white but also the lie that the culture and faith expression of white people is the ideal we should strive for.” Take a moment to consider the racial identities of those you personally look to for leadership, truth, and guidance. Consider how you imagine Jesus. What does God and godliness look like?
7. How do we often uphold the lie that whiteness is an ideal and an idol?
8. “As Jesus notes, it's worthwhile to count the cost before embarking on this work (Luke 14:25-33), lest well-intentioned but ill-prepared white people perpetuate harm” (p. 88). What might be the “cost” of deep examination of white supremacy in your own life? In your congregation? Conversely, what is to be gained through this work?
9. Consider the ways Westra suggests your congregation or you as an individual, a parent, a neighbor might work toward racial justice. What is a step you can take *this week*?

6

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

Connection over Consumption in Finances

THEMES:

- While many American Protestant leaders have encouraged theologies of socioeconomic hierarchy and individual hustle, Scripture teaches that faithful stewardship of finances goes far beyond smart budgeting, protecting our own wealth, and being kind to the ever-present poor.
 - Scripture indicates that the way we manage our finances and our economic systems should honor human dignity, the interconnection of creation, and God's—rather than our own—sovereignty over creation.
 - Unlearning consumerism and committing to creative generosity, especially within the context of community, helps us to live into a more Christ-like economic system.
 - Christians have a calling to critique and change financial systems which oppress others, exploit creation, and glorify consumption over stewardship.
1. On pages 94, Westra describes several of her own privileges, including access to financial literacy education and multiple types of financial safety nets. Reflect on these or related privileges in your own life. What supports or lack thereof have impacted your own financial status?
 2. Highlight the biblical commands and scriptural themes related to tithing, debt, land ownership, and sabbath on pages 99 through 103. Which of these commands do we, personally or societally, still observe? Which do we not?
 3. Personally, how can we unlearn “the story that equates God’s blessing with financial prosperity” (p. 104) and better align ourselves with a Kingdom-like financial system? Do you currently take part in any of the practices Westra mentions on pages 105 and 106?
 4. Communally and publicly, how are Christians called to critique or take part in our current economic system?
 5. Read Isaiah 61. Reflect on the financial and economic implications of this text. Read Luke 4:14-21. How does Jesus “expand the bounds of Jubilee” (p.107) with his ministry? Can you think of other ways Jesus upends or critiques the financial systems of his time?
 6. How familiar are you with the concept of reparations? Where does the Bible encourage, or even mandate, that reparations be made? How might you learn more about the imperative and practice of reparations in our current context? (Hint: Westra mentions “an extensive article on reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates on page 110-111. If you haven’t yet read it, this article is a great place to begin.)

7

RULE AND SUBDUE

Connection over Consumption in Relationship with Creation

THEMES:

- Colonial theologies of domination, beliefs about the apocalypse, and fears of association with “worldly” environmentalists have marred many Christians’ relationships with the earth.
 - Scripture teaches us that we, as stewards, have responsibility and connection to the earth, which is God’s good creation.
 - The choices we make impact our environment and our neighbors—and most especially our disadvantaged neighbors—so our Christian responsibility is to take both small and systemic steps to foster the health of our interconnected, divinely-created world.
 - Poor environmental conditions are closely linked to racial and socioeconomic injustices, so must be addressed through systemic change.
1. What language is used in your social circles as people speak about the relationship between us and the earth? Throughout your life, have you more often considered humanity’s role to be one of subduing or stewarding natural resources?
 2. Reflect on a time when you felt that your own “connection to the earth matters” (p. 120). Write down the experience or share it with the group.
 3. On page 121, Brianna Sas-Peréz shares with us: “as a Christian, I have come to see that loving my neighbor means considering my impact on the environment as a pursuit of economic, racial, and other forms of justice.” How does our care for the environment impact economic and racial justice?
 4. How conscious are you about the impact of your personal actions—sometimes called a “footprint”—on the environment? What steps do you currently take or hope to take? What makes these steps difficult? What could make them easier?
 5. “Finding ways to creatively steward the resources available to your community or congregation will take time, as well as assessment of the resources you have access to” (p.123). Take a few minutes now to brainstorm the resources available in your community. Make a plan to have a conversation with someone else in that community about stewarding a shared resource. When can you make a phone call or hold a meeting to discuss the importance of stewarding the earth together?
 6. Why is it important to push for large systemic change in addition to taking personal and localized action on climate and environmental issues?
 7. Stewarding our shared earth involves challenges, beauty, responsibility, and sustenance. Overall, how do you feel as you consider your role as a steward?

8

I DO NOT PERMIT A WOMAN

Connection over Consumption in Relationship to Gender

THEMES:

- Relegating women to subordinate ranks and setting stereotypical expectations based on gender encourages a culture of objectification and abuse.
- While evangelical leadership has largely clung to theologies affirming “gender exclusivity and hierarchy,” (p. 131) scripture and especially the life of Jesus shows us evidence of God’s equitable, inclusive, and empowering view of women.
- Patriarchal culture places value on each of us based on our hobbies, sexuality, marital status, clothes, and temperament, but God calls all of creation good without stipulations.
- Individually and communally, we must refuse to treat any person as an object, and therefore we should pursue radical healing and restorative justice for all those harmed by gender- or sexuality-based abuse or discrimination.

1. Westra describes growing up learning that “a true woman of God” is gentle and quiet (p. 129). What characteristics were you *taught* to admire (and emulate, if applicable) in women? Which characteristics did you *actually* admire and emulate?
2. On page 141, Cameron Overton asks “What if beauty lies in the expansiveness of gender, and not in the narrowness of the gender binary?” Is this a question you or someone near to you has asked before? Take time to consider it. Notice your reactions. Bring to mind someone, a characteristic, or an experience that reflects beauty in the expansiveness of gender.
3. What is patriarchal culture? What expectations and stereotypes are involved? How are individuals who don’t “check ‘acceptable’ boxes” (p. 135) impacted?
4. This chapter highlights several stories of those harmed by exclusionary and hierarchical narratives about gender and sexuality. It’s likely that we or someone close to each of us has similar lived experiences. How can we embody Christ-like love to these neighbors, friends, and family?
5. On page 143, Westra writes “Humans are not to be turned into objects for consumption—no matter what the cause.” How do our own communities objectify people, even if unintentionally? How might we begin to change these objectifying thoughts, practices, and systems?
6. What steps can you take in the public sphere to help ensure equal protections and freedoms for your own neighbors regardless of their gender identity or sexuality?

9

CONSUMING CHRIST

What Broken Bread Teaches Me about Salvation

THEMES:

- As we take part in the symbolic act of communion, we recognize that Christ's body was broken for us, and that we, too, are to extend ourselves for others.
 - There is a more complete, more continuous path of salvation than the one presented to us by Western culture and through evangelical church stories. While it is a winding path requiring courage and patience, it is the one guided by Christ alone—the true embodiment of God's love—and it is a worthwhile journey.
1. What does the sacrament of communion mean to you?
 2. How do we sometimes refuse to “break open to one another” (p. 154) because of our narrow views of salvation, cultural norms, or fear of “the other”? Reflect on a chapter or two of this book that most challenged you; on what topics do you find it especially difficult to prioritize communion over consumption?
 3. As you read this book, what surprised you? What did you learn that you didn't know before? What previously-held understandings deepened?
 4. On page 155, Westra writes “In reality, the only lines in the sand are being drawn by the One who refuses to condemn and refuses to judge.” What does this mean?
 5. What specific practices will you commit to as you “unlearn the path we've been formed to walk and...return instead to the connection and mutuality into which Christ invites us” (p. 155)?