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# WHEN WE BELONG

RECLAIMING  
CHRISTIANITY

*on the*

MARGINS

STUDY GUIDE BY ROHADI NAGASSAR AND MARLA TAVIANO

*Note: This guide has been written in Rohadi's voice, so the "I" always refers to Rohadi.*



Harrisonburg, Virginia

## FOREWORD

Kaitlin Curtice provides a beautiful posture to approach this book:

- *First*, hold space for truth, your story, and all that it will bring throughout the following pages.
- *Second*, hold care to approach the new ideas you encounter with openness.
- *Third*, hold your questions as dreams for better ways.

As you make your way through this reflection guide, I invite you to listen, whether you're by yourself or with a group. If you are with a group, use this posture to affirm one another in this journey in search of belonging.

## PROLOGUE

1. Reflect on the ways COVID has changed your life permanently.
2. Tell the stories of those you have lost and those disabled by COVID.
3. What has the global pandemic taught you about friendships?

## CHAPTER 1

1. On page 24, we read: "Naming divisions, questioning old ways, and embarking on new paths also has a name: deconstruction. In this way, deconstruction is a pathway unto liberation from all that ain't right in the world. It's a process of finding a more beautiful way to belong and live in the fullness of who we are made to be." Share your thoughts on deconstruction. What do you think it means? What feelings does it bring up in you?
2. Stop to reflect on the concept of belonging. Would you agree that you belong to yourself? Fully? In mind, body, and spirit? Explain.
3. Do you find belonging easily? Or does it take concerted effort? Describe a barrier to belonging you face.
4. "Christianity has become an impediment to finding true belonging" (p. 24). Does this resonate with you? What are the barriers to belonging you've experienced or observed in churches? Think specifically about the experiences of those pushed to the margins.
5. On page 27, we read, "New vocabulary helps imagine new ways of being and belonging." What are some words/phrases/concepts you've learned recently that have helped you imagine this?

## CHAPTER 2

1. On page 32, I share a favorite place for communing with God: "Hiking without any outside distractions or interactions is sublime. Just me in my head where I like to be. It's also a chance to listen for any whispering voice from God or the trees." Where do you go to be with God—or hear from God—and why?
2. Share a story or write a reflection about a time when you felt true belonging in the very pit of your soul.
3. Spend some time discussing or reflecting on the idea that true belonging is found in the relationship between things—be it with other people, creation, or God.
4. On page 38, I write, "You might be in the midst of questioning whether the stories in the Bible are trustworthy enough to serve as suitable foundations in your life." Have you had this experience? Give an example or two.
5. In what ways have you encountered unhealthy examples of belonging?

## CHAPTER 3

1. Which of the four options of belonging in church community do you resonate with the most? Was it the same five years ago? If not, how has it changed? Note: If you are in a group setting, give extra space for those who have been pushed to the margins by mainstream church culture to share their story of belonging and the pressures of assimilation.
2. “If you’re white you get a free, no-questions-asked pass to belong in virtually every public space,” I write on page 45. “That’s an inheritance rooted in the spoils of colonization and domination.” If you’re white, have you ever considered this? How do these sentences make you feel?
3. Name your own experience with “that ain’t right” moments that put you on the outskirts of community.
4. “Because churches in the West are formed in homogeneity, and lack distinct competencies at building more inclusive space, there’s always a *diversity limit*” (p. 54). What limits to diversity have you seen in churches you’ve attended?
5. Option 4 is *leaving*: “Walking away from it all may be the healthiest alternative, at least temporarily. When church community detracts from your pursuit of wholeness, and ultimately your health, it’s time to go. The negative experiences take a toll, and when harm accumulates, eventually the cost to stay outweighs the cost to leave” (p. 58). What are your thoughts on leaving a church? Have you ever done this? How did or would you decide when it’s time to leave?

## CHAPTER 4

1. Reflect on a moment in your life when the “scales fell from your eyes” and you became alert to a different way of being or understanding the world or your faith.
2. On page 66, we read that “wokeness can be loosely described as the collective awareness that Black culture develops to recognize and name systemic violence on Black bodies.” This is a very different definition from the one white conservatives have come up with. Discuss the differences in perspectives and share how *you* feel about “being woke” and where these feelings and ideas come from.
3. On pages 69–70, I list some disturbing actions that white Christian traditions have produced and legitimized—“domination, violence, colonization, abuse, and division, to name a few.” Give some examples of these and list any other harmful actions you can think of, then compare and contrast them with traditions that produce life.
4. Spend some time reflecting on how you have been shaped to believe and become, noting in particular those aspects of your being that may not be evident or seen, but reflect dominant worldview formation.
5. We talked about deconstruction in chapter 1 and continue the conversation here: “When something ain’t right, it sparks a process to determine where the problems are coming from. The questions we ask mark a stage of discernment called deconstruction” (p. 70). What are some bedrock questions you’ve been asking in your own journey?
6. On page 76, we read that “deconstruction involves the work to reclaim what gives life; discard what does not; and create beautiful tales.” In a notebook, journal, or a notes app on your phone, give space for the three categories of “reclaim, discard, and create,” and add to them as you continue to read through the book.

## CHAPTER 5

1. On whose traditional lands are you currently situated? (Tip: If you don't know that information, you can download the Native Land app on your phone.)
2. What did you learn about history in this chapter that was new to you? Why do you think this is your first time hearing about some of these historical events?
3. What were you feeling as foundational systems in your country were being named and explained?
4. If we see racism as systemic instead of individual acts, how does this change our response? What does our responsibility look like as citizens of a country built on racism and white supremacy?
5. In the section titled "But That Was a Long Time Ago . . ." on page 92, I write, "But the truth for people on the margins, and all people for that matter, is that white supremacy continues to *commodify, exterminate, demonize, and eradicate*." What are some of the ways white supremacy still does these things today?
6. Let's get a little closer to home. Name some specific examples of white supremacy that are evident in your own city or town and neighborhood.
7. Consult my Goodreads reading list for more books on the subject of white supremacy throughout history and continuing to present day.

## CHAPTER 6

1. Demographics in the United States and in the church are shifting, and "demands for change are causing certain alarm in dominant traditions. You can hear it in the vain calls from conservative Christianity to preserve culture, be it nationalistic or religious. The fear of losing inherited privilege has steadied conservative focus to retain the last vestiges of power and privilege" (p. 104). How have you seen this happening?
2. Discuss any aha moments you experienced learning about malformed powers and systems.
3. Has your experience in church been one of critique to society and culture? Was the critique about moral failures or of failures to do justice well?
4. Is your church community segregated or diverse? Use the criteria on pages 106–7 to help you decide. Talk through each question in the "recipe check" with your group.
5. When you picture Jesus in your mind, who do you see? Describe him. Where did you get your ideas of Jesus?

## CHAPTER 7

1. Say it again: You don't need permission to discover your liberation.
2. I have rewritten an abridged version of God's story from Genesis to the Gospels. Does this match your own understanding and formation as a Christian? What's different?
3. How has my introduction to nonviolent atonement and explaining the resurrection fit into your own understanding and formation?
4. One of the reasons I included the conversation around resurrection is because we must answer "why the cross?" Reflect on or discuss why resurrection matters.
5. In what pragmatic ways can you embody the ethic "the last shall be first, and the first last"?

## CHAPTER 8

1. The story in Acts 10 offers a preamble to help inform how Christian communities today can reinterpret scripture in a modern context. What topics or theological ideas are pillars that need to be reinterpreted today?
2. Can you be antiracist yet non-affirming of LGBTQIA people (including being against same-gender marriage)? Reflect or discuss.
3. “Does the discernment of scripture by a community mean that any theological position is up for grabs?” (p. 138). How is this question answered in the book? How would *you* answer it, and why?
4. What version of the Bible do you use? Have you thought about the magnitude of how interpretation influences your understanding of the stories? How might that influence your faith moving forward?
5. Why do I say that white settlers need to *dismantle* and *divest* from white supremacy but that they can’t *decolonize* (p. 151)? Share your thoughts on this.
6. Who are the people and communities—Black, brown, Indigenous, queer, and others—around you that you can learn from? Name them and list different ways you plan to learn from them.

## CHAPTER 9

1. Biracial and multiethnic people: On your own, name some tensions—then some superpowers—of being you. This is just for you, not for sharing with the group.
2. Have you ever been asked “What are you?” before? Have you ever taken offense to that question? Do you understand why it is offensive to individuals from groups pushed to the margins? Explain.
3. How are you doing when it comes to loving yourself? Share some tips.
4. Who are your people? Spend time learning something new about your ancestors. Share their stories as a group.
5. “The Bible coupled with theological beliefs can’t solve everything” (p. 164). How do you feel about this statement? Have you ever been part of a church community that believed “You don’t need therapy; you just need Jesus”? What are the dangers of this misconception?
6. What are some practical ways you could normalize therapy?

## CHAPTER 10

1. “So much of our Western Christianity is understood through the rigid Sunday morning service” (p. 174). The main elements: prayer, singing, and listening to a sermon. Every Sunday for fifty-two weeks a year. Does this describe the typical church service you’ve attended? If not, how was yours different?
2. How has the global pandemic adjusted our expectations and need for a regular Sunday service? During this time, describe different ways you gather and connect in community.
3. On pages 182–83, I write that “our society is quickly doing away with inherited authority. . . . Now authority is based on trust developed as we share life together.” How do you feel about this shift, and why?
4. “One inevitable question as we pursue creating new is how to prevent creating the errors from the past” (p. 185). Discuss some of these errors, then talk about some ways we could ensure we don’t repeat them going forward.
5. Reflect on—or dream together of—new possibilities of community. Remember: small counts big.

## CHAPTER 11

1. This final chapter begins with the assertion that there will be no tidy bows or put-together endings. The book concludes with uncertainty, not resolution. How does this make you feel? If your feelings are more negative than positive, how could you reframe them?
2. What are you already doing—or already a part of—that can be affirmed as a life-giving community? Are you practicing radical inclusivity in this community?
3. What are you resisting—and why?
4. How expansive is your table? Does it look like the picture in Luke 14:15–24? If not, what can you change so that it does?

### FINAL REFLECTION

True belonging is rooted in our imperfect ability—yet our valiant attempt—to embody love in all its forms. What one choice, act, or moment can you embody unto greater and deeper love with yourself and all that is around you?

Try this simple exercise:

*Inhale.*

God wants you to be free  
from all that seeks  
to make you less whole.

*Exhale.*

Repeat as often as needed.