

# **CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE TABLE**

**Growing together as progressive Christians.**

progressive  
christians  
u n i t i n g

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**Seven Session  
Outline and  
Discussion Guide**

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## Introduction

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE TABLE (CATT) began as an attempt to address something that seemed to be missing from our individual faith journeys – a way to connect to and be nourished by the richness of contemporary prophetic Christianity, as reflected in both the resurgence of progressive theology and in the unique experiences of fellow searchers. Many of us had felt isolated or limited in congregations or among acquaintances that could not, for many reasons, take the trip we had embarked on. We wondered how to find each other and how best to share our hopes and our frustrations. We longed to stand on firm theological ground, to find support for our convictions in Scripture, in current scholarship about Jesus, and in fresh perspectives on the role of faith in the world. Above all, we wanted to re-engage and re-energize our faith, to proclaim a renewed vision of Christianity focused on love, justice, and peace while transcending conventional congregational and denominational limits to broader Christian community.

Taking a lesson from the earliest Christian gatherings, our answer to these needs was the formation of a small discussion group, representing a variety of church and non-church experiences, that gathered monthly in a member's home to explore central issues in contemporary discipleship and share different perspectives on faith. We met for the first time in March of 2009. To get things started and create some structure for the discussion, we developed a session outline covering topics such as the challenge of building a progressive Christian movement, the relationship of church and state, the pursuit of equality for all, the challenge of economic justice, responses to war and peace, and the future of Christianity. The gradual addition over the intervening eight months of suggested readings and discussion questions to enlighten these topics completed the discussion module that follows.

With our inaugural CATT group continuing to thrive – moving beyond this seven-session introduction to dive deeper in some areas and explore others for the first time – we offer this module as a starting point for conversations around *your* table. It is our hope that many new groups will use this guide to start their own unique journeys – providing the spiritual sustenance we found together while also beginning to experiment with inter-group discussion, possibly facilitated by the Web-based resources of PCU. Indeed, as the idea for CATT took shape, we realized that each group potentially represented one of the fundamental components of a more effective, sustaining, and active network “uniting” progressive Christians – that CATT might ultimately be a program through which PCU could pursue its mission of “inspiring and equipping” individuals to build a prophetic movement for social transformation. We offer this, then, as a tool for both personal spiritual growth among a trusted group of friends and an introduction to a much larger fellowship.

### **Some Thoughts About This Module (Legs for the Table)**

This module provides suggested topics, readings, and discussion questions for seven consecutive sessions. This number of sessions seemed realistic – most of us felt comfortable committing to that length of time at the outset. It is also somewhat arbitrary and could certainly be extended. This is also not meant to be a definitive list of progressive Christian “topics of

interest.” Our outline seemed to cover the major points but there are certainly other topics that could be included (we’ve already been thinking about an “Interfaith” session, for example) and many ways to reconfigure the concerns included here. Nor is the order of sessions particularly important. While the initial session and last one seemed appropriate book ends for this overview, the other topics are not in any necessary sequence and can be rearranged to suit your group’s preferences and interests. There is certainly no requirement that each of these “sessions” be covered in a single meeting. While we tried to do that with our group, we often found we did not have sufficient time (particularly as the fellowship component grew in importance for us) to cover the topics in the depth we thought they deserved. Our solution was to promise each other that we’d double back once the initial sessions were complete – treating this as an overview. In short, we hope this structure gives you a starting point for your own original experience – asking only that you share with us the discoveries you make so that we can continue to improve and expand this resource.

### **Some Thoughts on the Reading (Food for the Table)**

CATT was not designed as a “book club,” although you certainly could focus on a single text at each meeting. Nor was it intended to function like a college course with “required reading” for each “class.” Instead, what we’ve tried to do is encourage deep discussion on some major areas of question or concern by offering a “tasting menu” of progressive Christian writing and thought (or other genres relevant to the issue at hand). These morsels are admittedly only a small fraction of the vast and growing banquet of inspirational and informative sources that should comprise the full “menu” for CATT. Even though our selections only represented appetizers, it wasn’t compulsory to consume everything on the list for every session – indeed we occasionally lacked the time or the desire to do so. We simply encouraged ourselves to sample each offering to see what we really liked. Some of the items were never specifically discussed (there wouldn’t be enough time in a week to do so properly!) but they undoubtedly added to the rich flavor of the conversation. Many we agreed to take up again – perhaps in greater depth – in the future. In some sessions the material was familiar to most; in others, new or unfamiliar material was predominant. We picked our way through books, periodicals, blogs, and other print formats but didn’t touch films, music, or other forms of performance – though they would certainly enrich the experience. In no instance was our selection of material meant to be definitive or comprehensive – only relevant to the topic at hand and representative of a much larger body of work. We all agreed that the selections fit well with the themes of the sessions, while admitting that there was so much more that could be mixed in. In some instances, developments in the country or the world provided additional material and helped shape the discussion in unexpected ways. The same holds true for the Questions associated with each session – they were not meant to be covered one by one in the discussion, only to stimulate our thinking about the reading before the session and provide a few potential jumping off points for discussion when we were together.

The bottom line is that the reading list and associated Quotes and Questions are only a suggested framework to help you establish and develop your own Conversation group in ways

that are completely unique to its members' passions and experience. So, in thinking about how to integrate the reading for your group:

- Remember that the principal intention is to have a great discussion that creates connections between group members and feeds their spiritual hunger. Members shouldn't feel they can't participate if they haven't been able to get through all the material. The readings are a means, not the end. They are also supposed to function as a door into the much larger body of progressive Christian thought.
- Don't feel you have to cover every piece – let participants focus on what they are interested in. Your group may decide to cut items from some of the sessions if they seem too heavy.
- Try to supplement some of the core texts with current articles or blogs. Encourage members to bring new material forward, particularly if it has been meaningful for them on their journey.
- And again, please share your discoveries with us. We want the bibliography for this program to grow through the addition of all the amazing work we missed. Together, we can ensure that future iterations of the CATT reading list provide an increasingly useful way to access the full depth and breadth of progressive Christian inquiry.

### **Some Thoughts on Organizing (Setting the Table)**

There are many, many ways to organize a successful and enjoyable small group discussion. We tinkered a bit and seem to have settled on the setting that works best us. Here are some of the things we learned about ourselves that might help you:

- Try to form a group of people who represent different Christian denominations and different churches within the same general geographic area. We realize this is not easy to do and so we are working on ways that PCU can provide a useful network to help you find people interested in participating.
- The group should be intimate, no less than six, no more than twelve (including the convener). Start a bit bigger because a few members may drop off in the beginning.
- Someone has to take responsibility for organizing. This is the person (you, perhaps!) who initially convenes the group, sends reminders out about meetings and readings, makes copies of the readings and questions for everyone for future gatherings, etc. What we recommend you avoid, though, is a leader who lectures or preaches, leaving participants to listen and only chime in here and there with a question or small bit to share. Your group should be as democratic and non-hierarchical as possible. You want everyone contributing, everyone listening, everyone fully engaged.

- Try to meet once a month. You can meet more frequently but, particularly in the beginning, too much time in between gatherings may create an obstacle to both discussion and fellowship (not to mention commitment). Remember, you need “cook” time (as one of our members said) between gatherings so that all the ideas you’re reading about and meditating on can settle but not so much time that the group loses its connection and passion.
- Meet in a home. It’s more intimate and fosters an environment conducive to openness and genuine sharing. Your group can decide whether to meet in a different home each time or in the same one. Hospitality is one of the most simple and important gifts we can give each other.
- Eat together (feed your bodies as well as your spirits!). We found that nothing helps the conversation around the table more than sharing the food *on* the table. Maybe it’s only some cookies or chips and salsa. Perhaps it’s a whole potluck. Having dinner together is definitely not a requirement, and it’s not how we started, but as we became closer, we decided our time together should include a meal. Looking back, we might suggest that your initial gatherings not include a full meal because you’ll need the time to get to know each other and dive deeply into the content of the topic and readings. But once you’ve reached a consensus about how to handle the discussion and have established your own rhythm, think about including a meal. Of course, make sure the burden of preparing (and cleaning up after) the feast falls evenly on everyone.
- Remember that each session should provide opportunities for every member to share their experiences and thoughts with the group. We like to start by asking everyone to talk about his/her life in the previous month – something we call “checking in.” But it is also important to bring personal experience to bear on the reading and discussion throughout the session. Each perspective becomes a resource for the group and talking about personal concerns or triumphs helps build trust. Sharing in this way also helps to keep the atmosphere of the gathering comfortable and free-flowing rather than formal and academic.

We hope that you find Conversations around the Table to be as enjoyable and profound an experience as we have. Just as this module grew out of our own curiosity and spiritual need, we want it to continue to grow as you continue your exploration and discernment. We are always available if you should need any help, brainstorming power, or feedback. We also ask that you let us know how you’re doing and share your additions, tips, and insights. Thank you for your interest in beginning a CATT group. May it feed your passion for pursuing God’s dream for the world.

With our very best,  
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Inspiring and equipping individuals and communities for courageous leadership  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Opening Prayer

### Prayer for a People in the Throes of Martyrdom

Lord, may your gospel be for me not a book,  
but Good News, lived and shared.  
May I not be embittered by oppression.  
May I speak more of hope than of calamities.

May my denunciations be first subjected to a discernment,  
in community,  
brought before you in profound prayer,  
and uttered without arrogance,  
not as an instrument of aggression,  
but neither with timidity and cowardice.

May I never resign myself to the exploitation of the poor,  
in whatever form it may come.  
Help me to be subversive of any unjust order.  
Help me to be free,  
and to struggle for the freedom of the oppressed.

May I never become accustomed to the suffering of the martyrs  
and the news that my brothers and sisters are enduring persecution,  
but may their lives and witness ever move me to conversion  
and to the greatest loyalty to the Kingdom.

May I accept my church with an ever-growing love  
and with Christian realism.

May I not reject it for its faults,  
but feel myself committed to renew it,  
and help it to be what you, Lord, want it to be.

May I fear not death but infidelity.

- Fernando Bermudez, *Death and Resurrection in Guatemala*

## Seven Session Outline

### Session 1

#### Progressive Christianity: Can We Build a “Prophetic Movement for Social Change?”

General introduction; getting to know one another; reaching consensus on group direction

### Session 2

#### Reigniting Resistance: The Role of Prophetic Action in the Dominant Society

Proposed Topics: The state of Christianity in America; Jesus’ Passion and its relevance today; the “prophetic voice” and how to use and amplify it; what procession are we in?

Suggested Reading:

- From Borg’s *Jesus*
  - Chapter 1: Jesus Today (pp. 3-26)
  - Epilogue: Jesus and American Christianity Today (pp. 293-311)
- From Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.*
  - Chapter 1: The Alternative Community of Moses (pp. 1-19)
  - A Postscript on Practice: (pp. 121-125)
- From Borg and Crossan’s *The Last Week*
  - Chapter One – Palm Sunday (pp. 1-30)

### Session 3

#### One Nation And Her Gods: Should There Be “Prophetic Politics?”

Proposed Topics: Church and State; the role Christianity has played in political power and the roles it could/should play; the “Bully Pulpit?”; denominational politics; God and the American Empire

Suggested Reading:

- Selection from Crossan’s *God & Empire*
  - Prologue (pp. 1-5)
  - Chapter 1: Empire and the Barbarism of Civilization (pp. 7-48)
  - Epilogue (pp. 237-242)
- Selections from *Reflections* (Fall 2007) “Faith and Citizenship in Turbulent Times”
  - Heidi Hadsell, “From Citizens to Ambassadors: Pondering Community in a Global Age (pp. 16-20)
  - Kathleen Kennedy Townsend “Less Partisan, More Political: A Way Forward for Churches (pp. 50-52)
- Selections from Wink *The Powers that Be*
  - Introduction (pp. 1-11)
  - Chapter 1: Identifying the Powers (pp. 14-36)

- Chapter 2: The Domination System (pp. 37-62)
- Lynn “A Progressive Vision of Church-State Relations” in *Dispatches from the Religious Left* (Clarkson, ed). (pp. 81-88)
- Cobb “American Imperialism” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed). (pp. 97-118).
- Pui-lan “Religion, Race, and Presidential Politics,” November 2008.
- Hedges “America is in Need of a Moral Bailout,” from *Truthdig.com*, 3/25/09

#### **Session 4**

##### **The “In” Game: Unconditional Love and Unconventional Equality**

Proposed Topics: Confronting persistent racism and inequality; feminist theology and the female prophetic voice; LGBT inclusion; immigrants and the “Other;” access (to education, healthcare, opportunity) and equality.

##### Suggested Reading:

- Selections from *Reflections* (Fall 2008) “Who is My Neighbor? Facing Immigration”
  - Confronting Six Misconceptions
  - Dan Romero “‘Not Like Us’: The Mainline’s Immigration Problem” (pp. 19-21)
  - George Rupp “Sending, Receiving, Embracing: The Pulse of Global Immigration” (pp. 23-29)
  - Renewalist and Rising: Latino Religion
- Esquivel “Are we more devoted to order or justice? In *Dispatches from the Religious Left* (Clarkson, ed.) (pp. 120-126)
- Selections from Ellison *Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis*
  - Introduction: A Peculiar Debate (pp. 1-9)
  - Chapter 2: A Justice Lens (pp. 36-55)
  - Chapter 6: Contested Christian Teaching
- Reuther “Feminist Theology” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed). (pp. 186-203).

#### **Session 5**

##### **American Idols: Capitalism, Consumption, and Corruption and the Path Toward Economic Justice**

Proposed Topics: The curse of consumerism; mass culture = mass control; environmental justice (for whom?); the society of greed; American Dream turned Global Nightmare; is there a Christian “alternative?”; what is the role of the prophetic voice?

##### Suggested Reading:

- Douglass and McAfee “Consumerism” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed). (pp. 55-74).
- Myers “The First Temptation: Israel, Jesus and Sabbath Economics,” *Liguorian Magazine* 2009 (accessed through [www.bcm-net.org](http://www.bcm-net.org))

- Selection from Jones *The Green Collar Economy*
  - Chapter Three: Eco-Equity (pp. 61-77)
- Laarman “America’s Fat Tues Turns to Ash Wed: Imagine a Humility-Driven Recovery,” blog posted on Religiondispatches.org on 2/24/09
- Etzioni “Spent: America After Consumerism,” *The New Republic*, June 17, 2009.

## Session 6

### To Dream the Impossible Dream: Following the Prince of Peace

Proposed Topics: The Church and war; our appetite for and culture of violence; the potential and problems of pacifism; the clarity of the Gospels and the price for practitioners; the Military-Industrial complex and the inevitability of war; the role of progressive Christians in confronting, preventing or diffusing conflict; is pacifism appeasement (and un-patriotic)?

#### Suggested Reading:

- Selection from Wink *Jesus and Nonviolence*
    - Chapter 5 (pp. 57-95)
  - Selection from Friesen, Langan, and Stassen *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Stassen, ed).
    - Introduction “Just Peacemaking as the New Ethic for Peace and War” in (pp. 1-37).
  - Selection from Soelle *Essential Writings* (Oliver, ed.)
    - “Peace not Security” (pp. 80-86)
  - Selection from Merton *Essential Writings* (Bochen, ed.)
    - “The Way of Nonviolence” (pp. 122-134)
  - Hedges “War is Sin,” blog posted on TruthDig.com on 6/1/09
  - King, Jr., transcript of address on All India Radio, March 1959
- and
- Rosenberg, “U.S., India Set Defense Deals,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2009.
  - Robert Scheer “Deep-Sixing the F-22,” blog posted on TruthDig.com on 7/21/09
  - Jeff Sharlet “Jesus Killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military,” *Harpers*, May, 2009.

## Session 7

### Emerging Church, Embracing Discipleship – Building a Prophetic Movement for Social Change from Inside and Beyond the Emerging Church

Proposed Topics: Building a progressive Christian movement: re-discovering/reclaiming the relevance and power of Jesus for personal and societal transformation. Beyond the congregation: Finding, connecting, and fortifying progressive Christians in Southern California. How do we get there from here (and can CATT play a role)?

#### Suggested Reading:

- Selection from Borg *The Heart of Christianity*
  - Chapter 11 (pp. 207-226)

- Selections from Butler Bass *Christianity for the Rest of Us*
  - Chapter 17 and Epilogue (pp. 255-284).
- Selections from *Resistance* (Cobb, Jr., ed.)
  - Afterward “Forms of Resistance” by Douglass (pp. 245-249)
  - Appendix “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth,” The Accra Declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – 2004 (pp. 251-257)

## Discussion Guide

### Session 1

#### Progressive Christianity: Can We Build a “Prophetic Movement for Social Change?”

The new human being in Christ is a resister, a revolutionary. She knows that for which she lives and gives her life. He is a fighter for the city of God. The new human being is a loving being who participates in the three forms of creation as a co-creator. He and she are committed to the renewal of the earth, to our liberation from bondage, and to resistance against death and all the powers of death. The third creation is as unfinished as the other two. All three creations continue still.

Dorothee Soelle

The point of ministry is not that the church may prosper but that the world may live (and not die) and rejoice (and not cower). Only the church on its better days—and the synagogue and the mosque on their better days—is able to mediate irascible holiness, evoke consequent ambivalence, manage that ambivalence toward newness, and then wait.

Walter Brueggemann

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

Your Journey –

What authors or clergy people have influenced your spiritual development – your progressive faith – most? What Biblical passages, stories, or “authors?” Do you have a “motto?”

Was there an event or experience that galvanized your progressive attitudes or turned faith into action/engagement? In other words, did something in your life “radicalize” you?

Do you indentify with terms like “radical” used to describe PCU’s vision or “revolutionary” used by Marcus Borg to describe Jesus’ ministry?

What about the word “prophetic?” What does it mean to you? Who are the “prophets” (Biblical, historical, and/or contemporary) who have influenced you? Is the time of “prophecy” past?

However you describe yourself, what do you see as your role (calling, ministry)?

Do you know other people like you (i.e., who share your progressive views) in Orange County? Are they in your congregation? In your neighborhood or town? Are they as active as you?

Progressive Christianity –

What is “progressive” Christianity? Why is it necessary – isn’t Christianity inherently “progressive,” based on the teachings of Jesus?

Was Christianity ever a “movement?” Is it now or should it be again? Can/should progressives be “evangelical” (without betraying our core beliefs)? What is our “Great Commission?”

Do you feel that progressive Christian views are well represented in the local, regional, and national dialogue about faith (in the media, popular culture, politics, etc.)? Do we have a voice? If so, where do you hear this voice? What can/should we do about this?

Is progressive Christianity unintentionally but inevitably elitist (the “narrow path” asking more of adherents, requiring more thought, struggle, etc. than many really seem to want out of “religion”)? How can this be a movement “for all” if only a few of us are “true believers?”

Are there certain subjects or parts of our modern lives that faith/religion should stay away from? Should there be a religious dialogue about war (even a “just” war) during a war? In short, should religious voices “critique” or criticize the government or secular society if those human structures fall short of “God’s dream” for humanity? Should religious people criticize other religious people who don’t follow a set of teachings the same way? Is there a right way to be Christian (only one)? How do we deal with disagreement/multiple views if not?

WWJRD (What would Jesus *really* do?) –

If Jesus were to begin his ministry this year in Southern California, what would he preach/teach about? Who might he dine with? Who are the new Philistines, the new Samaritans, the new lepers? What “demons” would he try to cast out? Who is “Caesar” and what Empire (and its collaborators) would Jesus oppose? Who are the “least of ours?” What would he think of “Christianity” as he found it in Orange County?

## Session 2

### Reigniting Resistance: The Role of Prophetic Action in the Dominant Society

Two processions entered Jerusalem on [Palm Sunday]. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in?

Marcus Borg  
(*The Last Week*, p. 30)

If one could pose the question, “What does it mean to be a human being?” and Thoreau were allowed to answer, his answer would imply at least three things. First a refusal of the world as it stands. Second a recommitment to fundamentals. What does it mean for a human being to need a house? Food? Clothing? Is the prefabricated suburban box a human home? Third, an understanding that to stand before these fundamentals requires spirit. Thoreau called it awareness. This awareness is nearly a form of prayer, and our culture is nearly bereft of it. “Attention deficit” is a cultural disorder, a debasement of spirit, before it is an ailment in our children to be treated with Ritalin.

Curtis White  
(“The Spirit of Disobedience,” *Harper’s*, April 2006)

All Americans – not only those of faith – who care about our open society must learn to speak about [the Christian Right] with a new vocabulary, to give up passivity, to challenge aggressively this movement’s deluded appropriation of Christianity and to do everything possible to defend tolerance. The attacks by the movement on the rights and beliefs of Muslims, Jews, immigrants, gays, lesbians, women, scholars, scientists, those they dismiss as ‘nominal Christians,’ and those they brand with the curse of ‘secular humanist’ are an attack on all of us, on our values, our freedoms and ultimately our democracy. Tolerance is a virtue, but tolerance coupled with passivity is a vice.

Chris Hedges  
(*American Fascists*, p. 211)

The crisis is not only in our society. The crisis is in our churches. With notable exceptions, people of faith and churches in our land have failed to recognize and adequately respond to the idolatries that abound. The very identity of our churches has long been inseparable from the identity of the state. We have readily assimilated the values and priorities of U.S. culture. Thus, too often our churches know who we are and to whom we belong. For the churches, too, this is a *kairos* moment in which we are called to conversion, our structures, values, habits, and assumptions in need of basic transformation.

Instead of challenging the status quo, the church tends to reinforce, if not bless, things as they are, usually under the guide of being “politically neutral.” It accomplishes this by spiritualizing,

privatizing, and generally undermining God's option for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Issues of power, class, gender, and material interests contained in the biblical texts have been too often ignored, even suppressed.

*On the Way: From Kairos to Jubilee*, 1994,  
a document created by the Kairos/USA working  
group formed in 1992.

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

### *Jesus –*

Do you agree with Borg that our culture wars are actually “Jesus wars?” Is the left holding its own or even really engaged? What are some of the effects of this warfare on politics, society, American views of Christianity? Is there any way to win this “war” or are human beings locked in eternal combat? Is it necessary to win or can two diametrically opposed views of God and Jesus co-exist harmoniously?

What was your childhood picture of Jesus? Does this picture fit into one or more of Borg's typologies or “ways of telling the story of Jesus” (i.e., the Apocalyptic Jesus, Jesus as Moral Teacher, etc.)? What songs or stories resonated with you and remain a part of your image of Jesus? Does the Emerging Paradigm tell a story of Jesus that is “persuasive, compelling, inviting – and challenging?” Is adult theological “re-education” necessary to help us “reclaim the basis of Christian identity and formation” while dispelling earlier paradigms?

Do you accept Jesus Christ as your *political* Lord and Savior? What would doing so mean? Can we really de-emphasize “beliefs” about Jesus in favor of committing to follow his “way?” If the “church” is central to Christian life, how can it be reengaged or repurposed to accomplish both personal and political transformation?

Do Americans need (or even want) the Kingdom of God? What are we willing to abandon in our civic faith (“The American Dream”) to fulfill God's dream? Is Jesus' passion at odds with American exceptionalism and individualism? Does “the way of the cross” inevitably conflict with “the American Way”? Can Christianity (of the emerging type) ever be “patriotic?”

### *The Prophetic Imagination –*

Is (or would) “a community rooted in energizing memories and summoned by radical hopes a curiosity and a threat in [our consumer culture]”? Could Christianity be such a community again? How could a renewed progressive Christian vision be a “threat?”

Taking Brueggemann's hypothesis -- “*the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us*” -- at face value, is prophetic ministry always to be marginal (a voice

in the minority or “in the wilderness”)? Can the task ever be finished? While the Christian Left is certainly critical, does it provide a compelling “alternative?”

Must we, as Brueggemann claims, always depend on “theological cause” (rather than simply theological inspiration) to drive social political reality for truly prophetic transformation to occur? What is the role of human intentionality versus the freedom of God? Does social radicalism need the “nourishment” of theology, “sanctions deeper than human courage and good intentions,” to succeed? Is he right that “doxology” is necessary for justice and compassion – “to transfigure fear into energy?”

It is tempting to suggest that today, not only is the empire not listening but it has also succeeded in supplying such a level of superficial palliation (“managed reality”) that the oppressed have lost the desire to cry out. Are we numbed to our bondage today? How is our empire keeping the pretense that everything is all right alive? Do we have just enough freedom to complain (and vote, etc.) that “no real grieving and no serious criticism” can take place? In other words, is “mobilizing people to their real restless grief” the key prophetic task today?

#### *The Last Week –*

The New Testament writers (and perhaps Jesus himself) appropriated and subverted the language and symbols of empire in offering their alternative vision. How could we do this today and what are the core terms of our empire (America’s lexicon of domination) that we should coopt?

How are the three features of the traditional “domination system” -- political oppression (or rule by a few), economic exploitation, and religious legitimization – at work in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America? What does our “normalcy of civilization” look like? What is the role of “the Church” – how is Christian theology used to justify the domination system? Don’t the prophetic themes of justice, prosperity, and security apply just as much to our situation today?

Are the “debt shoppers” of today the socioeconomic (and spiritual) equivalent of the “share croppers” of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine? How can we repent (go beyond the minds we have) to find (or rediscover) the “way” (*hodos*)? Should issues of debt, income disparity, educational and employment opportunity, consumerism, access to healthcare, etc., be theological concerns? If so, what should individual Christians or Christian churches do?

### Session 3

#### One Nation and Her Gods: Should There be “Prophetic Politics?”

We can love our nation... not blindly, but critically, call [it] back time and again to [its] own highest self-professed ideals and identities.

Walter Wink  
(*The Powers That Be*)

Let us march on ballot boxes until we send to our city councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress men who will not fear to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

For all of us today the battle is in our hands. The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways to lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. We must keep going.

Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Selma, Alabama, March 1965

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

What is *American* imperial theology today? Is it “religion, war, victory, peace” like it was in Roman times? If Jesus were to come today, how would he live out his counter-program of “religion, nonviolence, justice, peace?” Is that the role of “prophetic politics?”

How has the “myth of redemptive violence” not only shaped our political culture but also co-opted Christianity itself?

Do you find Wink’s ideas about the Powers compelling? Useful? Is “recalling the Powers” to their created purpose in the world a more important role for the Church than personal salvation? If the Church should be focused on the latter, who or what will “recall” the Powers?

Did you find anything in the reading that helped illuminate the significant debates currently raging in politics? (the Obama/Cheney debate over torture; the Cal Supreme Court vote to uphold Prop 8; the impending elimination of social services for children and the poor, not to mention the further erosion of educational resources, in the wake of the ballot initiatives defeat; the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme court [certainly a rich topic for next session], etc.)

Should the clergy weigh in on social/political/economic debates from the pulpit, even if they are reasonably convinced that certain members of their congregations might object? If we have separation of Church and State in politics (or do we?), shouldn’t we have it in Church too??

Should progressive Christians be “political?” How?

## Session 4

### The “In” Game: Unconditional Love and Unconventional Equality

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s Letter to the Galatians 3:28  
(NRSV)

I think fear is indigenous to empires....We always need an enemy....A well-defined enemy helps to justify the trappings of empire. It doesn’t matter who the enemy is as long as there is one. And so we move from one fear to another, one enemy to another. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1980, we were in a desperate search for new enemies. What we came up with were illegal aliens and gay and lesbian folks. But they couldn’t justify the military arsenal. Then after 9/11, we were off and running.

Rev. John Fife  
(Interviewed in *Reflections*, Fall 2008)

Christianity along with other religions must either adapt to changing conditions and altered awareness of the human condition or risk becoming irrelevant, increasingly decadent, and merely reactionary

...adopting a justice lens involves intentionally viewing the world from the perspective of those who are made to suffer and are now rising up, as best they can, to resist their oppression

Marvin Ellison  
(*Same-Sex Marriage?*)

Jesus never issued a demand for uniformity. Rather, he beckoned people to follow with a promise of healing, transformation, and love – that he would make known to his disciples “the way of life.”

Diversity is more than a political condition; it is something Christians do. Christians pursue diversity because it models creation, embodies love, and through the related practice of reconciliation, aligns our lives with God’s dream of harmony.

Diversity is, after all, a foretaste of heaven. God’s dream here and now.

Diana Butler Bass  
(*Christianity for the Rest of Us*)

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

Rosemary Radford Reuther contrasts “reform” with “resistance.” Do you agree with her assessment of the pace and consequences of reform versus the vigilance and energy of resistance when it comes to addressing inequality (this is certainly reminiscent of MLK’s frustration in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail cited by Kety Esquivel)?” How do we “transform” rather than “reform?”

What commonalities between the struggles, socio-political discourse, and the theological influences of justice movements (particularly feminism, immigrant rights, civil rights, and LGBT rights) do you find most compelling? Particularly with scriptural support, why can’t immigrants, the elderly, women, ethnic and racial minorities, gay and lesbian people, all see their individual struggles as one great struggle for human justice (for “God’s dream”)? What can we do to make those connections (“linkages”) obvious and natural to people?

Why is “sexual justice” so feared? How can we reorient Christianity to focus on the “diversity of human sexualities,” the “use and misuse of power” in sexual relationships, and the enhancement of the “dignity of persons” rather than the “sin of sex?”

How do we best overcome the “not like us” (Us vs. Other) mentality? How do we make diversity a virtue – an engine for justice (because the alternative – “just like us” – is both impractical and undesirable) -- without reducing it to an empty slogan? How do we structure and nurture a “living and justice-making community?”

Ellison defines justice as “the virtue of seeking abundant life for all.” Does abundance for all always have to come at the expense of those who already experience it? Is that the underlying, universal tension? Is this a “primitive prejudice” that can be overcome or a sad reality? Can there ever be “justice for all” without constant struggle?

## Session 5

### American Idols: Capitalism, Consumption, and Corruption and the Path Toward Economic Justice

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Luke 12:15  
(*NSRV*)

Time *may* be money, but one thing seems certain: money eats time. Forget the visions of sanctioned leisure: the view from the deck in St. Moritz, the wafer-thin TV screen. Consider the price. Sometimes, I want to say, money costs too much. We are impoverishing ourselves, our families, our communities—and yet we can’t stop ourselves. Worse, we don’t want to.

Mark Slouka  
 (“Quitting the Paint Factory,” *Harper’s*,  
November 2004)

Consumerism is destroying us spiritually. It supports a socioeconomic paradigm that is profoundly unjust and destructive of human community. It hastens degradation of the natural environment and the coming of ecological catastrophes. It is an extreme form of idolatry. If ever Christianity needed to reassert its living message it is now.

From Gordon Douglas and Ward McAfee  
 (“Consumerism” in *Resistance*)

Built on the background of the term [*aphiemi* – “release from” or “forgiveness of”] in Jubilee traditions, one can see that it is in social, political, and economic arenas that the sovereignty of God finds its primary expressions, breaking the stranglehold of the old order on those we have come to recognize as “the poor.”

Sharon Ringe  
 (*Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*)

Article 25:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including the food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible....Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order.

Gustavo Guitierrez  
(*The Power of the Poor in History*, quoted in  
Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*)

The great challenge of the twenty-first century is to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible.

E. O. Wilson  
(*The Creation*)

Something deep within us recognizes that the true worth of creation can never be reduced only to its value in the human marketplace. And yet it is precisely the people...who try to reduce every value to a dollar value, those who try to measure beauty with a calculator – to whom we have given great authority in our national life and global affairs.

Van Jones  
(*The Green Collar Economy*)

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

Do you agree with Douglass and McAfee that consumerism is the most fundamental challenge to Christianity today? Is consumerism the new dominant religion (are we really a *Consumerist Nation*)? Is “living well with abundance” or the “dilemma of plenty” the most important and thorny modern problem? Why is *American Idol* – and the whole consumptive, exploitive, cynical, and dehumanizing ethos of reality TV (etc.) -- more compelling and relevant than American Christianity?

How does consumerism impact justice? It is portrayed as choice – even freedom or liberty (pursuit of happiness now conflated with acquiring things), something everyone can aspire to. However, does consumerism in fact lie below most (or all) modern forms of economic, social, political, and spiritual injustice?

These authors offer (or cite) a number of “alternatives” to our consumption economy: God’s model from Exodus, in which “sustenance” is supposed to *circulate* rather than *concentrate*, described by Myers; Etzioni’s “communitarianism” and “transcendental activities;” Jones’ three principles for “eco-equity;” “creative work” or Havel’s “simplicity-leisure-craft” proposal in Douglass and McAfee; Laarman’s “humility-driven recovery.” Are any of these feasible? Are any of them particularly appealing to you? Do any of these offer a way to “save” capitalism from consumption or do we need to abandon a system based on profit and growth altogether?

On the other hand, to paraphrase Myers, “having internalized imperial appetites and desires, can we even imagine life apart from the very system that enslaves us?”

Sabbath economics as described by Myers seems to tie economic justice to environmental justice, in that the day of rest, the seventh year and the Jubilee, while leveling the economic playing field, also ensure that “our artificial human economy, with its addictive-compulsive tendencies, does not destroy the economy of nature.” Is there something practical in this idea, a way of letting nature rest so human beings can live more harmoniously on the planet and with each other? What about “the principle of the remainder” (Lev 19:9)? Is “eco-equity” (principally through access to the “bounties of the green economy”) a more practical model for elevating the poor and saving the planet than periodic redistribution?

Should Progressive Christians oppose “debt” (especially consumer debt) as the root of all inequality? Again, the domination system points to debt as a critical tool of growth (even “freedom”) and, historically, consumer credit allowed millions of Americans to own cars, homes, etc., to enjoy the “American Dream.” But do both recent experience and our theology put this in question? What’s the alternative?

How can we support the “megalogue” on consumerism that Etzioni sees signs of (turning the flicker into a flame) or exploit the “evangelical opening” that Myers identifies? Does Al Gore’s success in heightening awareness of and shaping opinion on global warming give us a model for energizing this national conversation? What should the role of Christianity or faith communities in general be in fanning these flames? Can we count on the pulpit? Paraphrasing Jones (who is referring to changing governments), do we need to “march into the halls of holiness and rewrite the rules” first?

What is the role of individual responsibility in all of this? Can the Church play a unique role here? What about “corporate responsibility?” How can we reorient the “pillage and pave” set?

Ultimately, do we really just need to give each other and our planet more time and attention? Has our economic system (and the consumerist lifestyle) left both (human beings and the environment) behind, “functioning as if we have a disposable planet – and disposable people?”

## Session 6

### To Dream the Impossible Dream: Following the Prince of Peace

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the work of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:3-4  
(NSRV)

There is, in fact, no other way to God for our time but through the enemy, for loving the enemy has become the key both to human survival in the age of terror and to personal transformation.

Walter Wink  
(*Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*)

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

Nelson Mandela

Today, we no longer have a choice between violence and non-violence; it is either non-violence, or non-existence.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
(*Radio Address to India, All India Radio, March, 1959*)

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower  
(*Farewell Address to the Nation, January 17, 1961*)

The utter failure of nearly all our religious institutions – whose texts are unequivocal about murder – to address the essence of war has rendered them useless.

Chris Hedges  
(*War is Sin*, posted on *TruthDig.com* on  
June 1, 2009)

Unilateralism contains an existential moment when the rationalism of business sense is abandoned.

Dorothee Soelle  
(*Peace, Not Security* in *Essential Writings*)

...the coming of the Kingdom is made clear and is “realized” in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in circumstances of their own place and time.

Thomas Merton  
(*The Way of Nonviolence* in *Essential Writings*)

Peace, like war, must be waged.

Glenn Stassen, et al.  
(*Just Peacemaking*)

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

When, if ever, should violence be exercised by the state? By an individual? Do you believe in “just war?” Can we imagine a reality in which war or violence is never the answer?

To lift a line quoted by Hedges, “what does the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ really [or practically] mean?”

Do the churches with which you are familiar have an active peace-seeking or peace-promoting ministry? How well supported is it? What are its practical aims? Is it linked into a denominational or networked effort?

Are churches today providing the “solid metaphysical and religious basis both in being and in God” that Merton says Gandhi believed were necessary for the “fully consistent practice of non-violence?”

What are the differences between Gandhi’s (and King Jr.’s) *satyagraha* (truth force) and the “just peacemaking” approach advocated by Stassen, et al.? Is the latter more practical for today’s world or does it represent a retreat from the earlier philosophy? Is it simply an evolution

of non-violent direct action? How do both of these approaches compare to Jesus' "Third Way" (to use Wink's term)?

Is the complete conflation of military and commercial (or "military/industrial") interests – combined with the general failure of effective government or civic oversight – as seen in Iraq with, for example, Blackwater and Halliburton, a sign that we've lost the struggle that Eisenhower warned about in his farewell address? What will these "powers" do when the current wars are over?

Does our trust in "smart bombs" (if not "THE Bomb") and the growing use of "human bombs" (martyrs) by our opponents suggest that Soelle's analysis of our new gods is (still) correct?

Is faith today, rather than being a deterrent to violence, war, and killing, actually a useful tool to get people to fight and encourage them in battle? Does believing that God is on your side or has your back (or will forgive you all your sins) allow you to overcome your natural aversion to killing other human beings?

Do we really have an opportunity – a window – to replace the kind of "defense jobs program" that Scheer rails against with "green jobs" (*a la* Jones) or other forms of "vibrant peace time economy?" Have we already missed the opportunity to do so (e.g., by better targeting recovery funds)? What can faith communities do?

Is there any conflict between Wink's claim that loving the enemy is in our "deepest self-interest" and Merton's that non-violence "excludes mere transient self-interest?"

Do you agree with Merton that "Christian non-violence...remains perhaps the only really effective way of transforming...human society?"

Does Merton's "ultimatum complex" remind you of any country's preferred foreign policy approach, particularly under a former administration?

## Session 7

### Embracing Discipleship – Building a Prophetic Movement for Social Change from Inside and Beyond the Emerging Church

I do not believe that we may gain spiritually and those that surround us suffer. I believe in the essential unity of humanity and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains with that person, and if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent.

Mohandas K. Gandhi  
(in *Essential Writings*, J. Dear ed.)

In the congregations I visited, politics was being redefined as communal practices of service, grassroots social transformation that works “up” toward larger change. ...these churches started with a theological vision of God’s reign, found their strength in spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship, and embarked on public involvement from a distinctly Christian sense of identity.

Diana Butler Bass  
(in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*)

True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God.

Article 33 of the Accra Declaration of the  
World Alliance of Reformed Churches - 2004

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

In this age of science, religious pluralism, consumerism, cynicism, etc., how do you answer Borg’s question “Why be a Christian?” Does this question or its answers ever trouble you? Are you comfortable explaining your answer to other people?

Has exposure to or understanding of another religious tradition enriched your understanding or experience of Christianity?

How does your congregation compare to those described by Diana Butler Bass? Where would you place it on the redemption/transformation axis or in relation to the “radical center?”

Do you see yourself engaged in “liturgical politics?” Is your congregation active in this way?

Assuming that your congregation is a mix of conservative, centrist and progressive views, how can we organize a larger movement that draws progressives together across congregations, denominations and regions? Without competing with traditional church communities, would this add something to the experience of being Christian?

Is it too late to reclaim Christian identity in the names of justice, peace, and tolerance? Should adherents of this form of Christianity be more vocal, demand a greater share of the national dialogue on faith? How?

Do you see statements of principle like the Accra Declaration having any impact on the focus or activities of your church specifically or The Church generally? What are some of the barriers to adoption of these high-level calls for justice and peace at the grassroots? Has your congregation adopted, endorsed, or emulated such a framework? Which one? Is it complete in your mind (i.e., does it reflect a comprehensive contemporary roadmap for the Kingdom of God or Christ's Passion on earth)?

How could CATT, or small gatherings like it, play a role in building the prophetic movement for social transformation? How should CATT be made accessible to other people without sacrificing the solidarity and trust of the small group? Could you lead a CATT group? Should CATT groups always aim to be cross-denominational? Could you ever see yourself discussing CATT-type questions or issues with a much broader community (i.e., through the Internet, social media tools, etc.)?

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