

Reading the Bible After Christendom

By Lloyd Pietersen

Study Guide by Reece Retzlaff (initial page numbers refer to the North American edition published by Herald Press; page numbers following in italics after the / refer to the UK edition published by Paternoster)

Chapter 1—Introduction

1. What is your first reaction to the opening quotation and scenario in this chapter?
2. “The thesis of this book is that the alliance between church and state from the second half of the fourth century onwards has resulted in ways of reading the Bible fundamentally alien to that of the earliest church.” What feelings does this statement evoke in you? What do you think?
3. On page 26/5, one of the markers of post-Christendom Pietersen mentions is that “Churches can no longer operate mainly in institutional mode but must learn to operate once again as part of a movement.” What might it mean for your congregation to operate as a movement? What might this look like today?
4. Which elements of Christendom (pp. 23–25/3-5) and which elements of post-Christendom (pp. 25–26/5-6) do you think are most identifiable where you live?

Chapter 2—Reading the Bible before Christendom

1. On pages 32–33/12-14, Pietersen explains five methods of exegesis. Which ones do you find the most attractive? Why are you drawn to them?
2. Of the early church (Apostolic) Fathers and leaders Pietersen outlines (pp. 34–37/14-18), which are you most drawn to? Why?
3. Might you consult some of these early writings when studying the Bible? Why or why not?
4. If you were to write your own creed or “rule of faith,” what tenets would you include?

Chapter 3—Christendom and the Bible

1. What was your initial reaction reading this chapter, especially relating to Constantine’s involvement in church politics, and the shaping of the canon?
2. How does the state influence the church today? In your city? Province/state? Country?
3. Are there beneficial ways in which the church and state can work together, or does working together automatically compromise the witness of the church?
4. How does the secular world affect your faith? How does your faith inform your political views?

5. In your view, is it better for the church to be “one harmonious whole” as per Eusebius (p. 50/31) or to be one engaged in debates? What are the advantages and drawbacks of each position?

Chapter 4—The Bible and the Subversion of Christendom: The Anabaptists

1. Reflecting on this chapter, identify which elements of past interpretation principles your church community still considers necessary? Which techniques or traditions should the church let go of? Which ones should the church embrace once again?
2. What is your opinion of education in biblical studies? Is such education helpful or do you feel that people lose their faith when they attend (religious) educational institutions? Why?
3. Which of the six core Anabaptist hermeneutical practices do you find yourself using the most? The least? Are there other ways of examining Scripture that you think would be helpful to add to this list?
4. In the last paragraph of page 82/*first paragraph of page 65* Pietersen lists some concerns regarding Anabaptist hermeneutical practices. Which of these concerns might apply in your own congregations (past and present)?

Idea for worship: Instead of preaching a sermon, have a time of interactive sharing on the text. This could be multiple people preparing short reflections on the text ahead of time, or breaking into small groups for a short Bible study, or having the whole congregation involved in discerning together, with some sharing, of how the Spirit is speaking to them through the text at this moment.

Chapter 5—Jesus as the Center of biblical Interpretation

1. What do you think of Pietersen’s recasting of the three “traditional” categories of Jesus as Prophet/Priest/King to Prophet/Pastor/Poet? What do you find helpful? What might be missing?
2. Do you tend to read Scripture politically? Why or why not?
3. What is your instinctive response to the interpretations Pietersen gives of the parables in this chapter? How have your opinions been affected by these interpretations?
4. Where and how have you found the space to express grief through lament?
5. Which Bible texts give you hope for the future? Which ones enable you to “imagine an alternative reality to the dominant culture (p. 101/84)”? Which ones challenge you?

Chapter 6—Reading the Whole Bible

1. What are some of the ways you see or would characterize God? Which ones are based on Scripture? Which ones are based on experience?
2. What do you think of the metaphor of the unfinished drama? What other metaphors might convey a similar idea?
3. Pietersen writes about Jesus and Paul recontextualizing Scripture for their contexts (p. 105/87). In what ways have you seen the biblical story recontextualized in your situation?
4. On pages 106–107/88–89 Pietersen discusses the understanding of “original sin” or “the fall,” against the understanding of the Gospel of grace. How have you experienced grace?
5. How do you understand the roles of Jesus and the Holy Spirit when reading the Old Testament?

Chapter 7—Reading the Pentateuch

1. What is your reaction to Pietersen’s explanation of Genesis 1–11 (pp. 111–112/93–94)? Discuss Pietersen’s assertion that Genesis 1–2 is a rejection of the “myth of redemptive violence” (page 112/94). What implications does such a conviction have for the church?
2. How do Pietersen’s explanations of the genealogies (p. 113/95) change how you look at these lists? How do these new understandings help you to better understand the beginning of Matthew (genealogy of Jesus)?
3. Do you think Joseph ‘sold out’ to Pharaoh? Why or why not? What does his example teach us today?
4. What idolatries do you see in society today? What idols might you have in your own life?
5. How has Pietersen’s explanations of these first five books of the Bible changed your understanding of them? Do the books address other concerns besides the ones Pietersen mentions (i.e., idolatry in Exodus and unbelief in Numbers, p 118/100)? What do you see as the main concerns confronting the church today? Are they the same as the ones Pietersen sees as the main emphases behind the five books of the Pentateuch?

Chapter 8—Reading the Historical Narratives (Joshua–Esther)

1. When reading the accounts of war, especially in Joshua, do you identify most with the Israelites or with the Canaanites? Why? How might seeing from the other perspective change your reading of the text?
2. How do you understand the violence of God? How does this make you feel?

3. Pietersen writes that “There is not a strict binary opposition between Israelite/Canaanite or insiders/outsideers” (page 125/107). What might this mean for us today? Who are our insiders and outsiders?
4. What emotions are invoked in you regarding the “Texts of terror” (pp. 125–28/107–110)? Why do you think these stories are in the Bible? What are the similar situations facing us today?
5. What do you think the book of Esther can teach us as we move increasingly into post-Christendom? Especially regarding how to live within a potentially hostile empire?

Chapter 9—Reading Wisdom Literature (Job–Song of Solomon)

1. What do you think the book of Job tells us about God? About the ‘prosperity gospel’? How does this relate to the book of Proverbs? Why do you think we have both books in the canon?
2. Have you ever used hymn texts as prayers? Have you spent time examining the theology of some of your favorite hymns? How might such experiences inform the way we use the book of Psalms?
3. Pietersen writes that some of the sayings found in Proverbs derive from Egyptian wisdom literature (p. 135/118). From what other cultures and religions have you experienced or been instructed in wisdom?
4. Why do you think the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are included in the Bible? How have these books helped you to encounter God in new ways?
5. Think of times you have been disillusioned with life or with God. Are your reactions more likely to resemble those of Job, Job’s friends, or the writer of Ecclesiastes? Why?

Idea for worship: Structure a worship service around a psalm of lament. Allow time for silence, anger, grief, and petition, before moving with the psalm to the time of praise.

Chapter 10—Reading the Prophets (Isaiah–Malachi)

1. As with the original hearers of some of the prophets, have you had the feeling of being in exile? Do you find the words of the biblical prophets soothing or confrontational for such experiences? In what ways?
2. How do the various visions of the prophets align or conflict with each other? How do these visions help us imagine God bringing healing in our time?
3. What are our empires today? Who are our prophets? How do these Scriptures help us to faithfully discern how to deal with empires and false prophets today?
4. On page 141/123, Pietersen asserts that the prophets “Call for covenantal faithfulness, they demand social justice, and denounce idolatry. Finally they look forward to the

renewal of creation.” What other characteristics do you see as defining the prophetic books, as individual books as well as a whole?

5. On page 149/132, Pietersen writes:

A hermeneutic committed to a Jesus-centered interpretation of the Bible will eventually see this picture of God resolved into a God of immense love who has recovered from his abusive past and is thus ultimately revealed to us in Jesus. This reading, which claims to take these Old Testament texts seriously, argues for a god who really does change and learns from his textual past.

Do you agree that such an assertion can be helpful in reading the Bible more faithfully? Why or why not?

Chapter 11—Reading the Gospels and Acts

1. What stands out to you as you read Pietersen’s summaries of the four gospels?
2. Which gospel are you most drawn to? Why?
3. On page 161/142, Pietersen writes “There is an empty tomb but no resurrection account. Instead the resurrection is referred to earlier in the narrative. So Mark ends with the ambiguity of following Jesus—terror, amazement, and fear.” Do you feel this ambiguity at times? How do you deal with it?
4. Do you feel that you have “taken up your cross” in your life of discipleship? How have you experienced persecution persecuted for your faith? What has “abandoning security and identity” (p. 166/147-148) meant for you?
5. How does the complexity of the symbolism and literary style help us to better understand and appreciate the gospel accounts?

Chapter 12—Reading the Letters and Revelation

1. What do you think of the scholarly position that only seven of the epistles (letters) were actually written by Paul? Does this position affect how you see the authority these letters? Why or why not?
2. How does Paul act as a “bishop”? For those in a “free church” tradition, what might be the benefits and drawbacks of this office?
3. What are you, personally and corporately, willing to give up or do to embrace peace for all through nonviolent justice, as opposed to peace through violent victory (see p.183/164)?
4. On page 185/166 Pietersen writes, “Paul’s own example alerts us to the fact that we cannot simply apply first-century texts to our different context. Appropriate obedient response requires some wrestling with, and reflection on, these texts.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How might we recontextualize some of these texts for our lives today?

5. Of the seven problems facing the churches in Revelation (as outlined on p. 191/172), which do you think best characterizes you and your congregation today? What message do you most need to hear?

Chapter 13—Reading the Bible for Spirituality

1. What spiritual practices or disciplines do you follow? Which ones would you like to learn more about?
2. How would you define Christian spirituality?
3. On page 203/183 Pietersen writes, “I would suggest that Bible study for spiritual growth and discipleship should be at the heart of any church’s pastoral program. Groups should be large enough to gain a variety of perspectives but small enough to allow everyone to participate.” If you were to rank the needs of your church, where would you place Bible study groups? What size of a group do you think strikes a good balance between being able to hear different perspectives, but allowing everyone to be actively engaged, and feel comfortable to do so? Why?
4. On page 205/185 Pietersen suggests, “A rhythm of engagement with the crowds and subsequent withdrawal for prayer [was] the key to Jesus’ ministry. This pattern of passionate engagement and solitary withdrawal must inform all who seek to follow Jesus’ example.” How has this been true in your life? Are you drawn more to one aspect (withdrawal or engagement) than the other? How do you strike a balance between the two?
5. Would you be ready to face persecution for your faith? What might help strengthen your faith in the face of persecution?

Idea for worship: Have people representing Moses, Elijah, and Jesus stand as the texts (or shortened versions) in this chapter are read. Reflect on the passages, and on the way Scripture interprets Scripture. How might this free us to interpret Scripture in new (and old) ways?

Chapter 14—Reading the Bible for Mission

1. What experiences have you had with evangelism and mission? What made these experiences transformative, painful, good, or bad?
2. What have you seen as the goal of mission? How has this chapter affected your point of view?
3. How do you react to the list of gods, powers, and idols that Pietersen offers on page 223/202? Can you think of other forces or ideals that can or have become idolatrous? How can we combat these idolatries in our own lives?
4. “In the climate of post-Christendom, if the church faces up to its marginal status, it may at last be able to see that the privileged position it occupied within Christendom came

at the price of being numbed to the radical claims of the gospel.” (p. 224/203). In what ways have you been numbed to the claims of the gospel? How have you become aware of this numbing?

5. In what ways are you engaged in mission today? How is mission tied into your faith journey of discipleship (both personally and corporately as a congregation)?

Idea for worship: Instead of, or in addition to, reading a Scripture text for worship, write and read a Targum of the text. Explore this in the sermon time, or use this time for small group discussion of contemporary applications of the text.

Chapter 15—Conclusion

1. How might we better learn to “read from the margins”?
2. In what ways would you like to see your community engage in reading Scripture together? Bible studies? Adult (or multi-age) Sunday school sessions? Table fellowships? Other ideas?
3. Of what you have learned in this book, what stands out the most? Why?
4. How has this book changed your perspective on the Bible?
5. How will you incorporate what you have learned from this book and from your discussions?