

TODAY'S HEADLINES, YESTERDAY'S WISDOM

This study guide is designed to provide questions that incite discussion, invite reflection, and inspire action. It was written to accompany The Moderator's Town Hall conversation with Brethren historians Carl Bowman, William Kostlevy, Stephen Longenecker, and Dale Stoffer.

Timestamps linked to the Town Hall recording are included in this guide, should a discussion leader choose a "pause and talk" approach rather than asking participants to watch the Town Hall in its entirety prior to meeting. This guide can also be utilized across multiple meetings, given that some questions might spark heartier conversation than one meeting will allow.

The video of this Town Hall can be accessed by using the following link: <https://vimeo.com/555303032>

@3:51 Moderator Paul Munday starts this Town Hall with a deep question to the historians: **What is the purpose of religion?** Either as a group or an individual (if using this study guide for personal reflection) begin your time answering the same question.

@10:09 The question is raised as to whether or not the Church of the Brethren exists to "save souls" or "work for justice".

- How do you define each of these phrases?
- Have you experienced these two actions (*works towards salvation vs. works of service*) to be at opposite ends of a decision-making spectrum?
- Historian Bill Kostlevy quotes a colleague, "*If you don't change individuals, other results won't happen.*"
 - o How do you see the works of salvation and service working together?
 - o Are there instances where these two paths are truly at odds?

@23:20 During a discussion comparing the Church of the Brethren in the 2020s with that of the Church of the Brethren in the 1880s, the observation is shared that more people seem to be identifying with the larger culture (*e.g. culture of the world*) - regardless of a right or left political lean - instead of the Brethren culture.

- How have you found this to be true?

- When considering a particular news headline or story, do you first think about what you're reading (e.g. *context, content, and consequences*) through your political bias/leaning or the perspective of Jesus as defined in the Gospels?

@26:10 The role of a Love Feast has been connected with the hope of unity (*cohesion within the Body of Christ*) since the start of the Church.

- How do you view the role of the Love Feast?
- Please share an impactful memory from a Love Feast experience in your life.
- What acts do you consider fundamental to the purpose of drawing together (unifying) the Body of Christ?

@33:32 In considering which factors have contributed to the growth of the church over time, the following sources were named:

(1) *When evangelism and mission are a priority*

(2) *When families are connected to the church*

(3) *When there's a belief that the church has something the world needs*

- o What contributes to growth or decline in your personal community of faith?
- o What factors do you believe are within the control of church leaders?
- o What factors are *not* within the control of church leaders?

@41:36 When considering questions like: *Will denominations wither away?* or *Where is the Church of the Brethren headed?* What's your perspective and opinion?

- Will "religion" or communities of faith always have a place in the world? Or are they slowly diminishing and will eventually disappear?
- If the decline in the number of individuals who claim to be Christians continues, and organized churches take a different form, what do you imagine the future of the Body of Christ will look like?

@47:44 Stemming from the question "*What does it mean to be "a peculiar people" today?*", the "Dunker-Punks" movement is mentioned. This is a group that is trying to accent bringing

back a way of being where one is not separated *from* the world but is differentiated in very observable and specific ways.

- What does it mean to you to be "a peculiar people in today's world?"

Read Romans 12

- How does this piece of Paul's letter to the Romans align with the encouragement to be a peculiar people?
- What's missing in this scripture regarding what's required to be a peculiar people?
- What phrases or themes from this passage describe your local church?
- What phrases or themes are missing from your congregational life?

@53:18 The contemplative heritage (Pietistic) of the Church of the Brethren has historically been a vibrant and prominent thread in the rich fabric of the denomination. However, one historian claimed that a renewed focus on this part of our heritage is asking "*for preachers to preach sermons that people don't want to hear.*" Another historian reminded listeners that "*sermons are a fruit of the gospel, not the point (e.g. a required element) of the gospel*". In other words: messages are to reflect a dependency on the Gospel, rather than a dependency on what will be liked.

- What are those personal, more inward-focused spiritual disciplines that help you grow in your relationship with the Lord?
- What are the outward experiences or actions that draw you deeper into your faith and following of Jesus?
- What do you expect from a Sunday sermon? Are you open to more challenging messages, not necessarily to your liking?
- Share one of the most impactful messages you've ever heard.
 - What made an impression?
 - What head knowledge did you gain?
 - What action steps did it cause you to take?
- Who has been one of the best preachers you've learned from?
 - What characteristics of their messages made an impression?
 - What characteristics of the preachers – as messengers – made an impression?

@59:59 In response to a question about how people at odds can hold each other in love when wrestling with Biblical tensions, one of the historians shared, *"The Brethren always tried to make sure the centrality of Jesus Christ is represented in everything they did."* He then said that Christ reveals the Father to us and, through the Bible, we get to know who God is – and who we are. The Bible becomes the conscience for us. The next claim made is that humility, self-surrender or sacrifice, and obedience are often not part of our vocabulary today.

- Do you agree? Why or why not?
 - o If you agree, what do you see as the cause for this loss?
 - o If you disagree, why do you believe some see these gifts missing from today?
- How are humility, sacrifice, and obedience upheld and encouraged in your church?

@1:04:13 The conversation turns to discussion around what's at the root of fostering schism.

- What do you see as the main sources of division in the church, today?
- What are viable remedies to division that one could be personally accountable for?

@1:09:40 As the final question of the evening, conversation turned to the traditions of catechism and discipling younger generations.

- Consider each life stage within your church (*children, youth, young adults, middle adults, seasoned adults*).
 - o How is each disciplined in your church?
 - o Is there an intentional plan for intergenerational connection and teaching?
 - o How have you been disciplined in your faith journey?
 - Who do you consider to be your current discipler?
 - Who are you currently discipling?

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise by Walter C. Smith

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes, most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might, thy justice like mountains high soaring above thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life thou givest, to both great and small. In all life thou livest, the true life of all. We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Great God of all glory, great God of all light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight. All praise we would render; O help us to see 'tis only the splendor of light hideth thee.