

Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion

SIX-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

It's our desire to provide discussion questions that will assist you in highlighting some (but not all) of the key content of *Why We Love the Church*. We encourage you to adapt these questions to meet the needs of your study group or ministry team. You may also find that certain portions of the book touch on hot-button issues for some or all members of your discussion group, address subjects with which they themselves are struggling, or speak to an issue that is especially relevant in their past or present experience. Feel free to allow opportunity to review or discuss those sections of the text at greater length as you seek to unpack the book's defense of the visible, institutional, often imperfect, organized church—and why we love it.

SESSION ONE

Introduction: Open Basements, Bad Marriages, and Decorpulation (Kevin)

Styles Make Fights (Ted)

1. “There is a growing movement among self-proclaimed evangelicals and in the broader culture to get spirituality without religion, to find a relationship without rules, and have God without the church,” Kevin writes (p. 13). “The narrative is becoming so commonplace,” he adds, “you could Mad Lib it.” Read through his tongue-in-cheek “Mad Lib” on page 14 as a group, and suggest answers that reflect what you’ve heard or read (or felt).
2. Kevin recognizes four kinds of people who might be reading *Why We Love the Church* (see page 15). Where in his groupings do you find yourself? Where are your friends, your family members, your neighbors and other people you care about?
3. In a section titled “Why You/They/We Don’t Love the Church,” Kevin offers an overview of the reasons people offer for their disillusionment with the church (page 16 and following). At this point in your reading, which, if any, of these have been leveled at your local church, or at the organized church in general, by people you know?
4. Kevin and Ted make it clear from the outset where they stand—starting with the title, *Why We Love the Church*. At the conclusion of Kevin’s introductory comments he affirms, “Indeed, being part of a church—and learning to love it—is good for your soul, biblically responsible, and pleasing to God.” Take a few minutes to break down Kevin’s statement as

you talk about some of the ways staying committed to the church might be, (1) “good for your soul,” (2) “biblically responsible,” (3) “pleasing to God.”

5. In their introductions, Kevin and Ted touch on many criticisms of the church as an institution that some believe is no longer relevant—that it is time to “move on to other ways of Kingdom building.” Which, if any, of these attacks on the church are you hearing from others? Which do you sometimes feel yourself? From where are you seeing the church come under attack?
6. On page 23, Ted introduces readers to Disgruntled Johnny, who represents all the burned-out, disaffected former churchgoers who have pulled out of the organized, institutional church. Johnny is also, Ted says, “missing out on all of the joys of organized, institutional religion, which now, culturally, is kind of like saying that there’s a lot of joy inherent in getting a root canal procedure or doing your taxes.” Ted himself, however, doesn’t feel that way and says, “I’m glad that my church is organized” (p. 26). Review Ted’s comments on what he values about his local church. Do you agree? What could you add, from your personal experience, to his list?

SESSION TWO

Chapter 1—The Missiological: Jesus among the Chicken Littles (Kevin)

Chapter 2—Turn the Page: Getting off the Road and Getting Back to Church (Ted)

1. “The word on the street,” begins chapter 1, “is that the American church is gasping its last breath.” According to many of its critics, Kevin says, “the church, then, has two choices: change or die” (p. 28). Those who believe the church is “in its death throes” frequently point, as evidence, to a declining percentage of Americans who attend church. How does the book answer that charge? Which, if any, of Kevin’s responses to the church growth/numbers issue (pp. 31–32) are significant to you?
2. Some have suggested by some that the “way we do church”—music, styles of worship, preaching, and other practices—has formed a roadblock to seekers and other nonchurchgoers who might otherwise encounter God in our churches. But beyond those issues, Kevin invites his readers to explore a series of deeper—belief-level—questions (pp. 33–35) that may have as much or more to do with any perceived church decline or stagnation. Are any of these questions relevant to your own experience—past or present? How do you respond to the final question, “Are we trusting God’s sovereignty in the gospel?” (p. 35).
3. In the second half of chapter 1, Kevin explores the big question of What is the appropriate “mission” of the local church? The debate frequently pits “bringing Christ’s kingdom of peace, justice, and blessing to the world” against a focus on “evangelizing unchurched Harry

and Mary.” What does the mission of God, as Kevin describes it (p. 36 and following) mean to you? If this is not an either/or proposition, what is the key to finding the balance between “saving the lost” and “serving those in need”? If we focus on community transformation, is there a danger of leaving out the gospel?

4. In discussing the role of the church in responding to the needs of the world (p. 40 and following), Kevin writes, “We need to reflect more carefully on the difference between the responsibility of the church’s calling and the individual Christian’s calling. Without this distinction, the church gets overwhelmed and overburdened with good ideas.” How can we find the good tension between the mission of the church and our obligations as individuals to be “salt and light”? Taken as a whole, in what ways are your church, other churches in your community, and the individual members of those churches having an impact on your community?
5. Many today talk about “building God’s Kingdom” and “redeeming the culture.” How does the book address those concepts, and what cautions does it raise about that terminology?
6. How do you respond to Kevin’s statement (p. 50): “I can’t help but feel that lurking beneath the surface of much in the current disillusionment with the church is a dis-ease with the traditional message of salvation. People are passionate about the poor, the environment, and third-world debt. But they seem embarrassed by a violent, bloody atonement for sin, let alone any mention of the afterlife that hangs in the balance.”
7. Kevin ends chapter 1 with a heartfelt warning that concludes, “There’s a danger our Christianity becomes all imperative and no indicative, all about what we need to do with God and little about what God’s done for us. There’s a danger that when people get disinterested in the gospel, they get disinterested in the church. And once they leave the church, they’ve left the only institution whose mission aims for eternity and whose gospel is truly good news” (p. 51). Take a few minutes to “unwrap” what he says in the preceding paragraphs. Are his concerns justified?
8. In chapter 2, Ted “gets authentic” and shares some of his own struggles with the church (pp. 60–63) at a particular moment in his life—showing readers that it’s okay to acknowledge our issues but we don’t need to “camp out” there. Do you relate to any of Ted’s issues? What makes you disgruntled at times?
9. Ted challenges the idea that getting together with a friend on the golf course or at Starbucks can be as good as—or even “more real” than—attending a worship service. What do we get from church that we can’t get anywhere else?

SESSION THREE

Chapter 3—The Personal: On Hurt and Heresy (Kevin)

Chapter 4—Appetite for Deconstruction: Why church is boring, Christians are (insert: lame, close-minded, or cliquish), and the church doesn't care about (insert my issue). Why all of this is both true and untrue. (Ted)

1. In three long paragraphs, Kevin begins chapter 3 by listing an astonishing number of criticisms that popular authors and others have leveled against the church. As you review this list, which have you heard or read or felt?
2. To what degree is an “outsider’s” rejection of church and religion really a rejection of moral absolutes? How do you respond to the Elton Trueblood quote on page 79?
3. In his section titled “Insider Angst” (page 82 and following), Kevin lays out some of the frequently heard reasons why even many Christians don’t like the church anymore, why they have left, or why they are tempted to leave. Which of these are familiar to you? Are any valid?
4. In a section addressed to church critics, Kevin writes, “It would be foolish for me to try to refute people’s individual experiences with the church. As I’ve said already, no question, some people have been hurt by bad churches. But I’d like church leavers to consider that some of their angst may be self-induced and some of their pain is more personal than profound. That is to say, it’s possible that a good deal of the problem for church-leavers rests with the ones leaving and not just the church.” He continues, “In all honesty I can say that in the times I’ve been hurt by church people or been disheartened, the biggest problems, in the end, proved to be those that came from my own heart.”

Do you agree with his assessment? How might the four pointed questions he poses (p. 85 and following) help church-leavers—or those tempted to leave—to clarify their thinking? Are these questions valid? How could church leaders, with humility and discernment, help the person struggling with questions like these?

5. In chapter 4, Ted has a great deal to say about pastors and their preaching. How did Ted’s observations about the pastors he met at the pastors’ conference make you feel about the state of the evangelical church in general, and particularly the churches those pastors represent? Do Ted’s observations have anything to say to the “sky is falling” critics of chapter 1?
6. How do you respond to Ted’s statement, “Church isn’t boring because we’re not showing enough film clips, or because we play an organ instead of a guitar. It’s boring because we neuter it of its importance” (p. 102)?
7. At the end of the chapter, Ted relates his online blog conversations—what he calls his “Internet Throwdown”—with atheist John Marks and Christian filmmaker Craig Detweiler. Although the exchange is not included in its entirety, what conclusions about the words and tone of the participants did you draw from the portions reproduced? Was Ted right to

challenge Detweiler on his “soft” responses to Mark’s challenges? Was Ted right to apologize for the tone of his challenge? Whether online or in person, how should the church respond as it has the opportunity to engage in conversation with unbelievers?

SESSION FOUR

Chapter 5—The Historical: One Holy, Catholic Church (Kevin)

Chapter 6—Brief Interviews: Snapshots of Churched People (including Chuck Colson and Art Monk) (Ted)

1. Preceding many of the chapters of *Why We Love the Church*, are selected verses of the traditional hymn “The Church’s One Foundation.” Have any of the verses of this theology-rich hymn been particularly meaningful or apropos to you?
2. Have some of today’s antichurch writers been guilty of what C. S. Lewis termed “chronological snobbery”? If so, in what ways?
3. Many who oppose the-church-as-we-know-it take issue with the idea of church buildings. How does Kevin respond to the statement from the book *Pagan Christianity*, “If every Christian on the planet would never call a building a church again, this alone would create a revolution in our faith”? (See page 119 and following.)

What is the significance of the place we meet for corporate worship—whether it is a home, a rented meeting hall, or a traditional church building? Do you feel okay about where you meet for church?

4. A second major area of concern raised by *Pagan Christianity* and other similar books is the subject of how we engage in corporate worship. Must worship be spontaneous in order to be biblical?

Can the Holy Spirit prompt a worship leader in a weekday afternoon planning meeting in the same way he prompts in the moment of worship? Have you experienced meaningful, biblical worship in a setting where churches benefit from both “in the moment” openness to the Spirit’s leading as well as planned, “rehearsed” worship?

5. Some critics of the church have a hard time getting past the dark stains on the history of the church and feel that, at the very least, today’s church should confess those sins that have been laid at its feet. But before confessing the sins of past church fathers, Kevin encourages readers to get their historic facts straight. Were there clarifications within his brief church-history lesson that you found to be of interest? Is it appropriate for today’s believers to confess decades-, even centuries-old, ecclesiastical sins? Why or why not?

Why, does Kevin suggest, it might be easier to confess the historic sins of the past than to express real repentance for our own personal failings? Why does it seem to be so much easier for many to deride the church, exaggerate her weaknesses, and minimize the good?

6. Ted begins chapter 6 with an extended interview with Chuck Colson. How do you respond to the following thought-provoking Colson quotes? How do they speak to a generation that is questioning church involvement? Do you agree?

Page 142: “As has been said, the church of Jesus Christ would be like Noah’s ark; the stench inside would be unbearable if it weren’t for the storm outside.”

Page 144: “I have a passion for teaching people that there is truth and it’s knowable. To understand that there’s an organic connection between faith in Christ, and being part of a church. The relationship is spelled out so beautifully in Ephesians 5. Just as a husband and wife at the altar become one flesh, you meet Christ at the cross and leave as one with His church.”

Pages 144–145: “I’ve seen much of the world where people could not get together for worship, and I’ve seen how desperate they were for fellowship, and how desperate they are for teaching and learning. Church isn’t something to be endured, it’s something to be entered into joyfully. Maybe you don’t like the sermons, or maybe the music bothered you one Sunday, but those things are trivial compared to the very act of committing yourself to being part of the body of Christ, and participating fully.”

7. Ted’s narrative continues with the stories of Pastor Zach of Lansing, Michigan; College Church of Wheaton, Illinois; and Pro-Football Hall-of-Famer Art Monk. What can we learn from these examples about what’s good about the church? What did you draw from their stories?

SESSION FIVE

Chapter 7—The Theological: The Church of Diminishing Definition (Kevin)

Chapter 8—The Year of Jubilee: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Church (Ted)

Dear Tristan: To My Son regarding My Hopes and Dreams for Him as They Pertain to the Church (Ted)

1. Many postmoderns would be happy to “take Jesus without the church,” but Kevin strongly disagrees, and writes, “Churchless Christianity makes about as much sense as a Christless church, and has just as much biblical warrant” (p.164). Do you agree? If so, which of the

arguments the book cites in favor of active participation in the visible church—including those from John Stott, Timothy Tennet, Dietrich Bonhoffer and others—do you find most persuasive? (See pages 159–164).

2. At the bottom of page 162, Kevin poses several questions about the visible/invisible church: “Can the church remain invisible as an organized entity so long as we love God and love each other? Is it possible, as Brian Sanders argues, for Christians to be so committed to the invisible church that they need to leave the visible church on principle? In short, do we need to see the church or can we just be the church?” How do you respond to these questions?

What do you think Kevin means when he writes, “We see the church with little ‘already’ and a lot of ‘not yet’” (p. 163)?

3. Even though it’s not really practical, many of us could use what Ted envisions as a “year of jubilee,” free from programs and responsibilities and minus the kind of busyness that keeps us from doing what’s most important: *just reading, praying and being involved in a local church body*. But while we can’t let go of all personal and work obligations or dismiss all the programs of which we’re a part, in what ways could we still achieve some of the desirable results (p. 187 and following)?
4. Later in chapter 8 (pp. 190–194), Ted offers readers his own informal list of “Why I Love My Church” and what it means for him and his family to walk through life as part of their local church. What stands out to you? What might you include if you created a similar list of your own?
5. Ted concludes this chapter with a section titled simply “Go.” Which of Ted’s reasons would reflect your own motivations for “going”? Earlier in the chapter (the bottom of page 189 and following), Ted writes, “It occurs to me that sometimes you do the thing (going to church) and then the feelings happen later.” Has that ever been true for you?
6. In his “Dear Tristan” letter, Ted revisits the conclusion of the preceding chapter, but with a very personal focus on his five-year-old son. As you read these words from a father’s heart, what do you see as key pieces of advice?

SESSION SIX

Epilogue—Toward a Theology of Plodding Visionaries (Kevin)

1. In his epilogue to *Why We Love the Church*, Kevin calls for a “more thoughtful, biblically robust, and historically rooted ecclesiology.” Then he adds, “but renewed ecclesiology is only one part of the answer. We need theological renewal in other areas as well.” He goes on to list some of those areas, including an understanding of who Christ is, what is meant by the

Trinity, and what to make of the authority of the Bible and the nature of the gospel, then adds, “but one doctrine in particular must be recovered and more fully embraced if the North American church is to pull out of its current crisis in ecclesiology . . . the doctrine of original sin.” Why does he believe this? How, does he say, would the doctrine of original sin help us in understanding the church’s imperfections? (See page 210 and following.)

2. “There are problems in our communities we can solve, or at least make better. With hard work, wisdom, and lots of God’s grace, the lot in life for millions can improve for the good,” Kevin writes. “But we need to guard against idealism that figures heaven on earth is possible with a little bit of love” (p. 214). How does that kind of idealism reject or ignore the doctrine of original sin?
3. How can a clear understanding of the doctrine of original sin also enable the church to keep its focus on what’s really important? (See “A Matter of Perspective,” p. 216 and following.)
4. On page 217 and the pages that follow, Kevin urges his readers—church-lovers and church-leavers—to look in the mirror and take a more honest look at ourselves. What truth does he suggest that “honest look” might uncover for you, whether you are a pastor, churchgoer, or consider yourself to be among the “disgruntled”?
5. How do you respond to the statement, “What we need are fewer revolutionaries and a few more plodding visionaries. That’s my dream for the church—God’s redeemed people holding tenaciously to a vision of godly obedience and God’s glory, and pursuing that godliness and glory with relentless, often unnoticed, plodding consistency” (p. 222). Have you been convinced of the need for “fewer revolutionaries and more plodding visionaries”? Why or why not?

If you chose the path of the “plodding visionary” as Kevin proposes, what would that look like in your own life? (See pp. 222–226.)

6. “Don’t give up on the church,” Kevin concludes in a final section he’s titled “You May Kiss the Bride.” How do you respond to his final words of advice?