

# **Group Study Guide for:**

**MATURE CHRISTIANITY:**

*For come-of-age Christians in a come-of-age world*

**By William A. Holmes**  
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## A Word from Bill Holmes

Productive discussion in a group doesn't just *happen*. Obviously, the content of the material being considered is important, but other factors also contribute to maximizing a group's potential for interaction with that material.

Size can be important. If a group is more than twelve or fifteen in number, the larger setting may itself discourage some persons from risking questions or opinions. Such reticence doesn't necessarily mean people are not involved in a discussion – they may be intensely involved. But it can mean the size of a group discourages them from venturing a point of view. And when that happens, those persons not only lose the promise of creative self expression, but the group as a whole fails to be enriched by additional contributions.

If a group is less than ten – especially if it is no more than three or four persons – it runs the risk of having a more limited perspective on the material. Most experts in group dynamics recommend around ten or twelve persons for creating an optimum dynamic for group discussion.

While size is important, an even more important factor in group dynamics is the responsibility each person is willing to assume for his or her own participation. If only one, two or three persons are doing most of the talking, it is hardly a *group* discussion. A genuine discussion depends as much on the common courtesy of listening, as it does on expressing one's own opinions. To this end, I would suggest each group session begin by going around the table or room with everyone offering a brief response to the same opening question, and then proceeding with other questions and group discussion. The opening question in the Introduction and in each of the chapters lends itself to an objective and succinct answer.

There is one further issue: "rabbit trails." The material under consideration can easily become, not the object of genuine reflection and conversation, but an excuse for launching into another subject – extraneous to the book and peculiar only to one person's interest. Such occurrences are often referred to as "rabbit trails" – leading away from the main path of dialogue and diverting the group's focus to an

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individual's agenda. It is not that such occasions necessarily are unimportant, there may well be times when a group decides to make a "rabbit trail" the main path of their conversation. But this should be an intentional decision by the group, and not a decision imposed by one person. Most groups have only a limited period of time to consider and discuss the material at hand. That period may be the only occasion they will ever have to interact with others in that particular setting. The stewardship of such an occasion is the responsibility of every person in the group.

As the author of *Mature Christianity*, I welcome the prospect of the book being the subject of a group's consideration and critique. I would like to think that what I've written lends its self to such a setting, and is seminal and provocative without being arcane or esoteric. However, "the proof is in the pudding," and the "proof" in this "pudding" is whether a group, discussing the book, can reconcile the integrity of their own life experiences with the explanations and interpretations set forth in each of the chapters. As I have stated in the Preface, this little book is not for everyone. It will have served at least a clarifying purpose even if, upon examination, persons come to conclusions different from my own. I only ask that you engage the book through the lens of a world come-of-age, and that you hold each other accountable for what it means to live most authentically in this century, rather than in some earlier time. In that context, then, let the discussion begin.

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**Introduction**

1. What word or phrase stood out for you in this section?
2. What did you find pleasing or disturbing?
3. What was it about Freud's analysis that was so disturbing to the author?
4. As you reflect on your own life, is there a longing to be watched over, protected, and/or rewarded?
5. Is religion often defined as fulfilling these longings?
6. Why is it a problem to "project our longing for security to a cosmic level and call it 'God'"?

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**Chapter I: Faith, Fear and Fatherhood**

*Rethinking and Reclaiming the “Father” Metaphor for God*

1. What stood out for you in this first chapter?
2. Where have you heard the “Father” metaphor being used as the most popular expression for referring to God?
3. At the time of 9/11 in 2001, what were your feelings upon witnessing the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers ablaze, collapsing and interring several thousands of our fellow citizens?
4. What do you think of the author’s claim that just as the world was once a scary place for primitive peoples, it’s still a scary place today?
5. Would you agree or disagree that the cumulative integrity of the biblical message is on behalf of living a caring, self-reliant existence before God?
6. If the above is true, what are its implications for how we go about living our lives today?

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**Chapter II: When Christians Come of Age**

*Carrying the “Father” Metaphor to its Logical Conclusion.*

1. What one word or phrase represents what this chapter is about?
2. Do you believe that God intervenes in the affairs of nations and in the lives of people, very much as a father might intervene in the life of a child? Why or why not?
3. When undecided about an issue, or what to do about a problem, do you think God will, in one way or another, “guide” you as a parent might “guide” a teenager? What would be a “mature Christian’s” way of dealing with those issues?
4. Whether you agree or disagree with the author’s characterization of how the Bush administration led us into invading Iraq, can you think of other examples where horrific tragedies have been perpetrated by persons alleging “divine guidance?”
5. If God’s love is at all analogous to a human parent’s love, what does it mean in either instance to carry that love to its logical conclusion?

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**Chapter III: Bonhoeffer on “Religionless Christianity”**

*“Living without God, before God, with God.”*

1. Before reading this chapter, what did you know about Dietrich Bonhoeffer?
2. What do you think of Bonhoeffer’s claim that modern people no longer rely on “God” as a “working hypothesis” for explanations, and that this very circumstance is its self the gift of God?
3. By defining Christ as “the man for others,” what does Bonhoeffer mean by saying we are “in Christ” when we take seriously, “not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world”?
4. Bonhoeffer describes the institutional church of his time as almost exclusively identified with the upper and middle classes, always on the defensive, and never taking chances. He says it has little or no effect on the great majority of people and public morality. Any parallels today? What are they?
5. How did you feel about Bonhoeffer’s insistence that the institutional church, for all its unfaithfulness, is not to be abandoned, but reclaimed and renewed?
6. Bonhoeffer laments that belief has become a *content* question, as in creeds, doctrines, orthodoxy. He wants belief to be the existential question: “What are you prepared to die for, to stake your very life on?” Answering that question cost him his own life. How would you answer the question about what you are prepared to die for, and how does your answer to that question disclose what you really believe?

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**Chapter IV: Bonhoeffer's Ethics**

*Making Ethical Decisions without "Divine Guidance"*

1. What part of this chapter did you find most pleasing or most disturbing?
2. How would you identify with the author when he talked about the dilemma of how much to spend on others, and how much to spend on one's self?
3. What are some obligations that you find impossible to adequately fulfill?
4. When we justify our decision-making by appealing to "conscience" or "motive," where does "conscience" or "motive" come from? What's wrong with appealing to the "consequences" of decision-making?
5. Bonhoeffer says we must give up asking, "How can I be good?" and "How can I do good?" and ask instead, "What is the will of God?" Where does he say we look to discover the will of God?
6. Did Jesus enjoy an advantage over other humans when it came to knowing and doing God's will? What was his method of decision-making?
7. If God's will is for us to make moral and ethical decisions in the tension between freedom and obligation, what does that feel like? By making responsible decisions, what happens to our uncertainty, ambivalence and guilt?

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**Chapter V: Cold Facts about Hot Issues**  
*How Our Lust for Certitude Divides the World.*

1. In a word or phrase, what most struck you about this chapter?
2. In light of Bonhoeffer's ethics, what criteria can be used to determine whether a fertilized ovum should be brought to term? Does Roe/Wade approximate that criterion?
3. If homosexuality or heterosexuality is not a matter of personal choice, what emotions and insecurities are behind most expressions of homophobia today?
4. What are the three fears the author suggests are the primary motivations for opposition to gun laws, and what do you think of his analysis?
5. In applying Bonhoeffer's ethics to war, why does the author claim that both pacifist and non-pacifists wear a "shirt of flame," and are denied feelings of exoneration and righteousness?
6. Where do you find yourself as you consider these, and other controversial issues? Or, is it better to leave these matters to people who feel passionately about them?

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**Chapter VI: Redefining “Mental Health”**

*Embracing Vulnerability and Existential Anxiety*

1. Is there a vivid word or phrase that “stuck” with you from this chapter?
2. In discussing “mental health,” the author asks, “What if being in Jesus Christ means acknowledging our vulnerability as finite creatures, taking seriously the threats to our existence, and finding ways to live meaningfully without being paralyzed by risks and dangers?” How different is this description from what usually passes in our society for “mental health”?
3. What do you think of Tillich’s claim that the randomness and capriciousness of life creates anxiety in each of us? What about death and the inevitable end of life as we know it?
4. When have you found moments of personal satisfaction and fulfillment ending too soon? What do we all know about loss of meaning, emptiness and boredom?
5. What’s your experience of guilt and fear of condemnation? Have you found an internal judge asking, “What have you made of yourself?”
6. The author says the anxiety we’ve been discussing is a normal part of what it means to be human and the only ways to deal with this are by being in denial about it, or by reflecting on it theologically. What do you make of that? What are some ways we deny it? Handle it theologically?
7. What would it mean for you to reflect theologically on your own experience of anxiety?

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**Chapter VII: Courage and the “God above God”**

*Living as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Person of Faith*

1. What picture comes to mind when you think of courage?
  
2. What is the courage required of us in facing death?
  
3. What is the courage required in facing guilt and condemnation?
  
4. What is the courage required in facing doubt and meaninglessness?
  
5. If the deity of supernatural theism removes our fear of death, relieves our feelings of being unacceptable, and erases our doubts and emptiness, what does it mean to live as a person of faith before the “God above God?”
  
6. The book declares that “we can come no closer to the divine presence than through personal relationships with others.” What do you think of such a claim, and what would it mean to live as though each person *is* a divine presence?
  
7. If the language of liturgy and devotion is never literal, metaphysical or scientific, but language that is always poetic, musical, and symbolic -- then how else can mature, worshiping Christians refer to the “God above God” except as “Father,” “Mother,” or with other metaphorical expressions?
  
8. How do you feel about Tillich’s claim that we always do this paradoxically and not literally?

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**Chapter VIII: Tomorrow's Christendom**

*The Future of Post-Theistic Christianity*

1. In a word, did this last chapter leave you feeling hopeful or pessimistic about the future of Christendom?
  
2. What did you think of the author's application of the parent/child metaphor to American churches, suggesting that members of most conservative churches see God as "parent" to their inner "child," while members of most mainline churches view God in the role of "parent" to their inner "adolescent"?
  
3. How welcoming or tolerant would be most congregations of God as "parent" to their inner "adult"?
  
4. A large portion of this chapter is devoted to describing the rapid spread of a conservative Christianity throughout developing nations in the Southern hemispheres. Are there any of you in this study group who visited or lived in a developing nation, and can report on the dominant religion you found there?
  
5. What is wrong with using numbers as the ultimate criteria for determining what is true or false?
  
6. How did you feel about the author's claim that there are only "institutional Christians"?
  
7. What do you think of the criteria the book suggests for measuring an authentic community of faith?
  
8. After reading this book, are there any new imperatives you now embrace and are inclined to act on? Can you share them with the group?