

Affirmations of a Dissenter

by C. Joseph Sprague

Discussion Guide and Recommended Reading

Affirmations of a Dissenter (Abingdon Press, 2002) offers a composite of affirmation and dissent on the work and mission of the church today and challenges readers to maintain their faith and hope while working within the church for congregational renewal. As bishop of the Chicago area, Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church, C. Joseph Sprague shares his insights and suggestions on such issues as racism, church leadership, world peace, homosexuality, and biblical authority. He calls Christians to become one with Christ and each other by living their faith and making a difference in the world. You may not always agree with him as you read this book, but Bishop Sprague succeeds in making you think about what you believe and why you believe it.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus tell his disciples in Matthew 10:16 to be “tough-minded and tender-hearted”? How does that advice apply to us today?
2. What do you have in common with the early life of the author? How were your childhood and youth different from his? Give a brief overview of your faith journey.
3. How has your Christian faith developed? Why do you believe what you believe? Have your beliefs ever been challenged or changed by a book or a person? Explain.
4. Explain what the author means by “the idolatry of biblical literalism,” and give your views on this matter.
5. In your own words, explain “affirmative dissent” as it relates to your faith. What can a Christian do when he or she disagrees with the policies or practices of the church?
6. Explain what the author means by “Bible stories we have not heard,” and give an example.
7. Do you agree with Bishop Sprague that neoliteralists pick and choose biblical passages to suit their own needs and beliefs? What do you think it means to be faithful to biblical authority? What do you think is the best approach to biblical interpretation? What is your approach?

8. Discuss the issue of divorce from both the conservative and progressive perspectives. List major arguments from both viewpoints.
9. Recall a time when you took an unpopular position on an issue or stood with an outsider. What is the price you pay when you dissent?
10. Discuss why Christology is a divisive issue within United Methodism.
11. What statements in Chapter 4, “Fully Human Jesus,” do you agree and disagree with? Did the author change your mind about anything?
12. What do you believe is the most important issue facing The United Methodist Church today? Bishop Sprague believes the issue is the near-absence of hope. Do you agree?
13. In your own words, explain what hope means to you as it relates to your personal faith and that of the church.
14. Where do you believe that United Methodism has fallen short? Where has it made significant contributions? List some of the strengths and weaknesses of the church. Where on this issue do you agree and disagree with Bishop Sprague?
15. Do you agree with Bishop Sprague that ministry is a seamless garment that contains intertwined issues that cannot be separated? Explain your rationale.
16. Bishop Sprague states that war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ, as does *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. What alternatives and strategies for peace does he support? What alternatives and strategies do you support?
17. How do your views of God and of the church’s work differ from Bishop Sprague’s views as expressed in this book?
18. What does Bishop Sprague have to say about United Methodists who sit in the middle on war issues today? Do you agree with him?
19. What new insights about Afghanistan did you receive from reading this book?
20. What seven strategies for peace in Afghanistan does Bishop Sprague suggest?
21. Do you agree or disagree with Bishop Sprague concerning the issue of racism and how the church should respond? Explain your answer.
22. Bishop Sprague offers his interpretations of seven biblical passages often linked to homosexuality. Give your own interpretations of these passages.

23. Give some of your own examples of how Christians misunderstand the Bible and end up straying from the teachings of Jesus.
24. Look through the book and locate places where Bishop Sprague says “I affirm” and “I dissent.” How many of these statements do you agree with? What is your sharpest disagreement with the beliefs of Bishop Sprague?

Other Books Your Group Might Like to Discuss

To learn more or to order, click on the title or please go to www.cokesbury.com and search by title or item number (ISBN).

Becoming the People of God Series (Abingdon Press)

Cobb, John B. Jr. *Becoming a Thinking Christian: If We Want Church Renewal, We Will Have to Renew Thinking in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993. ISBN 0687287529

Hamilton, Adam. *Confronting the Controversies: A Christian Looks at the Tough Issues*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. ISBN 0687045673

Inbody, Tyron L. *The Many Faces of Christology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. ISBN 068703003X

Jones, Scott J. *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. ISBN 068703485X

Jones, W. Paul. *Worlds Within a Congregation: Dealing With Theological Diversity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000. ISBN 0687084342

Willimon, William H. *Calling & Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000. ISBN 0687090334

Wills, Dick. *Waking to God's Dream: Spiritual Leadership and Church Renewal*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. ISBN 0687004829

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