

Irresistible Revolution – A Group Reading Guide

Shane Claiborne's book *Irresistible Revolution* has caused quite a stir as it challenges readers to a renewed understanding of the fundamental importance of action, justice and support for the poor as being at the heart of the gospel message.

With Shane in Australia in January to speak at the Uniting Church National Christian Youth Convention, it's timely to take a look at the book, and to provide some reading notes/questions to allow small groups to read and reflect on the book together.

Format: The Guide is set out to allow for 4 sessions to discuss the book. Depending on the group and the pace with which discussion occurs it may be necessary to either extend the number of sessions, or to reduce the number. In particular the fourth session will need to be carefully shaped by the facilitator in response to the particular group, and it's experience in discussing the book. It may be that the fourth session is not required.

Group Size & Session Time: We would envisage that this discussion guide be suited for groups of no more than 6-10 people, and who are meeting for 60-90 minutes per session. Again, this can be adjusted to meet the needs of particular groups

Feedback: If you use the reading guide, we would appreciate hearing your feedback. In particular any changes you found helpful will assist us to improve the material.

Contact: The author of this group reading guide can be contacted at scott.guyatt@ucaqld.com.au. It was first prepared as a resource to support congregations of the Uniting Church in Australia who were preparing for NCYC 2009, at which Shane Clairborne was a keynote speaker.

Session 1: Getting Started on the Revolution

Before this session: Preferably read the whole of Irresistible Revolution - but at least read Chapters 1-4. As you read jot down notes on significant ideas, or particular phrases that jump out at you. Bring your notes to the discussion group session.

Session Description: Use the following questions to prompt discussion. Feel free to disregard or skip over questions to suit the needs of your particular group. The session is designed for a group discussion time of about 60-90 minutes with a group of 6-10 people.

1. What do you think of when you hear the term "ordinary radical"? Do you know anybody that fits the term? What about them is radical? Would you be willing to apply that term to yourself?
2. Describe your first reactions to your reading of Irresistible Revolution. Where do you think the author is headed? Are you feeling motivated to continue reading and grappling with the ideas in the book?

Chapter 1: When Christianity was still safe

1. What do you think it means to say "we no longer have martyrs, only celebrities"?
2. Claiborne says Christianity appears to be about the "don'ts" rather than the "do's". What do you think are the "do's" of Christianity?
3. Where have you unexpectedly met God? (or the other way around!)

Chapter 2: Resurrecting the church

1. What does it really mean to love our neighbour? How have we made loving our neighbour safe? If you can, read p67-70 of Simon Carey-Holt's new book "God Next Door" to inform this discussion
2. How do you feel when reading the story of St Edwards? Who did the wrong thing here? The Catholic church? The homeless families? Shane and his friends? What message do you hear for your local church in this story?
3. Read the description of the church on p62. Does this describe your local church? Should it? Could it?

Chapter 3: In Search of Christianity

1. What do you think Kierkegaard was saying when he asked 'have we have stopped living Christianity in order to study it'? Was he right? What are the consequences of this?
2. What does it mean to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done here on earth as in heaven"? Do you really believe that prayer when you pray it? What kind of response does believing that prayer demand of you?
3. Where is your Calcutta? (p89)

Chapter 4: When comfort becomes uncomfortable

1. Tony Campolo says "Jesus never says to the poor, 'come, find the church' but he says to those of us in the church, 'Go into the world, and find the poor, hungry, homeless, imprisoned'". How do you respond to this kind of statement? Where do

you find this kind of message in the gospels (read and reflect together on Matthew 25:31-46 for a starting point)? What are the implications for you? for your church locally? for the church more broadly?

2. It is said that God 'disturbs the comfortable' and 'comforts the disturbed'. Talk about a time when you have felt disturbed, or comforted. How are you feeling right now? Do you have any initial thoughts as to how you might respond to those feelings?
3. What kind of Jesus would we in the western world come up with if we were to 'create Jesus in our own image'? Do you think we have been guilty of this? Is there any way to avoid the trap of seeing Jesus/God through our own social/cultural lens?

Session 2: Jesus made me do it

Before this session: Preferably read the whole of Irresistible Revolution - but at least read chapters 5-8 (you will have read 1-4 before Session 1). As you read, jot down particular ideas or phrases that jump out at you. Bring your notes with you to the discussion group session.

1. Take a moment to think back over our discussion during the first session. What issues did the discussion raise for you? What did you agree with? What did you disagree with? What if anything do you take from that first session?
2. Describe your first reactions as you read this section (Ch's 5-8) of Irresistible Revolution. Where do you think the author is headed? Are you feeling motivated to continue reading, and grappling with the ideas in book?

Chapter 5: Another Way of Doing Life

1. Have we (Christians) shown the world another way of living? If we did, what would it look like? Where (or in whom) do you see this other way? What are its characteristics?
2. How do you respond to the following quotes? What do they say to you about 'another way of doing life'?
 - "Preach the gospel always. And when necessary, use words" < St Francis >
 - "We are trying to shout the gospel with our lives" < Sister Margaret >
 - "It can be hard to hear the gentle whisper of the Spirit amid the noise of Christendom" < Claiborne >
 - "Who you are thunders so loudly, I can't hear what you are saying" < Ralph Waldo Emerson >
3. What would it look like for you to 'despectacularise'? How do you understand that phrase? Why would it/could it be important (or is it)?

Chapter 6: Economics of Rebirth

1. What insulates you from the poor? What layers are there between your own life, and the lives of those who are broken and hurting? How could you remove some of those layers?
2. Name some of the key areas in our culture, our society and your community that could be challenged by a 'theology of enough'. What about some areas in your own life?
3. Think for a while about the concept of radical interdependence. Can you think of examples of this kind of common living? What stops us from practicing this kind of life? What would enable it? How might we sum up the courage to act unilaterally in beginning to practice interdependence?

Chapter 7: Pledging Allegiance - When Kingdoms Collide

1. Name some examples of the dualism of sacred/secular that you see in your own church? In your community? In your own life? What might it look like if this dualism was removed? What stops us? What stops you?
2. Reflect on Claiborne's time in Iraq. What does this story unfold for you about the Iraq conflict? Who didn't he spend time with in Iraq? What does it really mean to say "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt 5)?

3. Where do you see the nationalist allegiance colliding with the gospel in your own country?

Chapter 8: Jesus made me do it

1. Claiborne talks about God who is not at all safe, but who is good. What is dangerous about God? Jesus? The gospel stories? What are some dangerous gospel stories you know of from your own community?
2. Think back to our discussion last time about the Jesus we create in our own image. What do we lose when we only understand Jesus as kind, gentle, good, tall, blond-haired (Swedish?); but forget about Jesus who is bold, courageous, angry, confronting?
3. Who is the Jesus you follow? What does it mean to you personally, to say that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Session 3: Making Revolution Irresistible

Before this session: Preferably read the whole of Irresistible Revolution - but at least read chapters 9-13 (you will have read 1-8 before Session 1 & 2). As you read, jot down particular ideas or phrases that jump out at you. Bring your notes with you to the discussion group session.

1. Take a moment to think back over our discussion during the second session. What issues did the discussion raise for you? What did you agree with? What did you disagree with? What if anything do you take from that first session?
2. Describe your first reactions as you read this section (Ch's 9-13) of Irresistible Revolution. Where do you think the author has ended up? Are you feeling motivated to continue grappling with the ideas in book?

Chapter 9: Jesus is for losers

1. What do you think of the title of this chapter? How do you respond to such a sentiment? How do we need to re-examine the gospel if we understand Christianity as being only for those who 'have it all together'? Why do some of us spend so much time and energy pretending to our Christian friends that we have everything under control?
2. Have you noticed the tendency to form Christian ghettos? In which we study, work, play, live in almost exclusively Christian circles? What is the danger in this? How might we examine or value the kinds of monastic communities that involve being closed off from the outside world?
3. What is so scandalous about grace? If you have it, listen to the Paul Colman Trio 3-track series "Banquet Table". How does this inform your discussion? (from the album [Serious Fun](#))

Chapter 10: Extremists for Love

1. 'We live in an age in which people, when they hear the word Christian, are much more likely to think of people who hate gays than people who love outcasts, and that is a dangerous thing'. How do you respond to this statement? What does it mean to be labelled 'Christian' in your community/culture/nation?
2. Who do you know who might be described as a Christian 'extremist for love'? What marks them as being different? How do the people they encounter react to them? What would it look like for you to be an extremist for love?
3. Claiborne quotes Dr King as saying:
'To our most bitter opponents we say: "Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our houses and threaten our children and we will still love you. Beat us and leave us half dead and we will still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory'.

How realistic is this kind of extremism? Would it work, could it work in the real world in which you live? What would it take for you to live this kind of attitude?

Chapter 11: Making Revolution Irresistible

1. How does gentleness sit with the call to Christian activism? How does this sit with the story of St Edwards church (in which a bunch of people 'illegally' took over an abandoned cathedral? When is it ok not to 'go quietly into this good night'?
2. Talk through the prayer of Danish pastor Kaj Munk - quoted on p294/295 of Irresistible Revolution. What issues does this prayer raise for you? Would you dare pray it?
3. What do you see as the difference between an activist, and a lover? Can you identify people that fit with your description?

Chapter 12: Growing smaller and smaller...until we take over the world

1. What is the point of doing small things? How do you respond to Mother Teresa's quote: 'We can do not great things, only small things with great love. It is not how much you do but how much love you put into doing it.'? How does this contrast with a society in which the call is to be great, or at least famous?
2. What do you think of Claiborne's interpretation of the parable of the mustard seed? How does it compare or contrast with other understandings of this story you have been exposed to in the past? What would it be like if we considered Christian mission as being like this spreading infectious mustard bush? (where I grew up, an equivalent might be the lantana bush).
3. When we analyse it from the big-picture view, we could say that Jesus life was unremarkable. He was an itinerant preacher, born in an obscure middle eastern village. He never travelled very far from his home territory, never wrote or published anything, assembled a rag-tag band of followers and was eventually executed after only three years of his active work. How did such a seemingly insignificant life impact the world so greatly? How does it continue to do so?

Chapter 13: Crazy but not alone

1. 'We live in a world of zombies, amid a deadness that has infected even the church' (Claiborne). What do you think Shane is getting at here? As you look around your church, your community, can you see any of this deadness? What's at risk? What's the cause? How can it be tackled?
2. In this book, Claiborne seems to take plenty of pot-shots at the denominational church. Can you identify some of his critiques? Do you think they are warranted? Do they apply to your local church? To your denomination?
3. If these critiques of the church are valid, then why does Claiborne encourage us to remain connected to 'momma church'? What is it about the church that makes it important for 'ordinary radicals' to remain plugged in? What does the church offer them? What do they offer the church?

Session 4: What, so what, now what?

Before this session: You will have read the whole of Irresistible Revolution, have made notes on particular ideas or phrases that jump out at you, and discussed in detail many of the ideas contained in the book. Bring your notes with you to the discussion group session.

Note for Facilitators: The questions in this session are deliberately simple and generic. The group facilitator will need to shape this session, and the questions included here, in response to the way in which the group has experienced the reading of Irresistible Revolution. It may be the case that this session is not required, and that the group has reached a natural end point to its discussions. The session outline follows a simple process of what (did we encounter), so what (does that mean), now what (are we going to do about it).

What (did we encounter)?

1. Take a moment to think back over our discussion during the third session. What issues did the discussion raise for you? What did you agree with? What did you disagree with? What if anything do you take from that first session?
2. For you personally, what were the key issues raised in Irresistible Revolution? Without necessarily analysing them, identify the phrases, questions, statements that have stuck with you
3. Summarise Irresistible Revolution in 50 words or less (for a book jacket for example)

So What (does all that mean)?

1. How have the core ideas of the book challenged your own thinking? Your own attitudes? Your own actions?
2. How does your this book inform your journey of discipleship? Your understanding of the core gospel message?
3. Summarise the impact of Irresistible Revolution on you personally, in 50 words or less.

Now What (are you going to do about it)?

1. Have you come away from your reading of Irresistible Revolution, and our group reflection sessions, with any concrete ideas on aspects of your life, faith, community that you hear God calling you to reshape? What will it look like? What kind of support and encouragement would it take for you to live out those plans?
2. Have you come away from your reading of Irresistible Revolution with any different (or affirmed) perspectives on the life of a faith community/church in response to the gospel? How would you like to see your church reshaped? What are the obstacles to that happening? What are you personally willing to give to see this occur?
3. Summarise your action plan in (you guessed it) 50 words or less.