

## **An Inconvenient Loss of Faith**

### **Small Group Discussion Questions**

Some readers will want to discuss *An Inconvenient Loss of Faith* in book clubs, Sunday school classes, and other groups. The following questions will help your group engage in meaningful dialogue around some of the major themes found in the novel.

#### **Making a Faith Tradition Change (Chapters 2-3)**

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul comes to realize that “it’s time” to depart his conservative evangelical faith tradition and join a more progressive one. What led him to this decision? What were the consequences? Have you ever made a similar decision to depart your faith tradition? If so, why? If you ever felt you should have left your faith tradition, but did not do so, why didn’t you? What are the pros and cons of leaving the faith tradition of your past?

#### **A Church of Grace (Chapter 7)**

On his first Sunday at Grace UCC, Paul spoke about his dream of being part of a community of grace. What would a church of grace look like? Have you experienced that kind of congregation? Is your current congregation a community of grace? What examples do you see of that reality? How can your congregation become a stronger community of grace?

#### **Being “Saved” and Believing in the Bible (Chapter 10)**

In chapter 10, Paul is asked about his conversion to Christianity. He explains how he was “saved.” Did his story resonate with you? If so, why? What does it mean to be “saved?” Is that something that happens all at once? Or is it a process? Could it be either?

In chapter 10, Paul tells about a college lecture that changed his life when he heard the words, “Although we must always take the Bible seriously, we don’t always have to take it literally.” Do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not? Why do some people hold so tightly to the concept of a perfect, “inerrant” Bible? What are the dangers of biblical literalism? What is your understanding of the nature of the Bible? Is it all divine? Is it all human? Could it be both human and divine?

## **Bad Religion (Chapter 17)**

In chapter 17, Paul grapples with “bad religion.” What is Paul’s understanding of unhealthy religion? How would you describe bad religion? Where do you see examples of toxic religion today? What do you think is the best response to negative religion? What did you think about Paul’s sermon on bad religion?

## **Science and Religion (Chapter 18)**

In chapter 18, we see the tension between science and religion, especially as it relates to evolution. In his lecture at his wife’s college class, Paul points out two options on evolution: literal creationism, and “theistic evolution.” How do you navigate the conflict between these two radically different world views? How would you answer the question asked of Paul, “Can I be a scientist and a Christian?” Why do you feel that way? What other examples of conflict between science and faith can you think of? How do you resolve faith/science issues in your own mind?

## **The LGBTQ Debate (Chapter 22-24)**

In chapter 22, Bill lays out three positions found in today’s church concerning LGBTQ issues. Review these three options in your group. Discuss and critique each one. What position do you favor? Why? If you belong to a congregation, what position/s do they favor? Can you think of other options? How do you think this conflict over human sexuality will ultimately play out in the American church? In chapter 23, we see the aftermath of Grace UCC’s decision not to celebrate a gay union in the church sanctuary. How did you feel about that decision? How did you react to the compromise that followed? In chapter 24, we see Paul’s response to a leader who disagreed with him on this issue. What did you think about that story?

## **The Providence of God (Chapters 28-30)**

Chapters 28-30 deal with the traditional Christian doctrine of providence (God’s involvement in the world). In these chapters, Paul loses faith in a God of supernatural intervention. What prompted his loss of faith in providence? Do you resonate with Paul’s struggle? If so, why? Do you believe God providentially works in the world? If so, how does that happen? Why do you think there is so much such suffering in the world? How do you reconcile massive suffering, both in the natural world and human experience, with belief in a loving and powerful God?

## **The Church (Chapters 31-32)**

Chapters 31-32 deal with Paul's growing disillusionment with the church. Review the discussion between Paul and Bill in chapter 32. What are some of the factors that trouble Paul about institutional religion, both historically and currently? Do you share those concerns? Why or why not? At the end of the chapter, Paul speaks about the grand scale of good and bad in the church. He thinks it's about 50/50. At the very end of the chapter, the story flashes forward into the future. Due to events that occurred in the Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical church, an older Paul decides that the scale "tipped to the bad side." Do you agree? Why or why not?

## **The Nature of God (Chapters 36-38)**

In chapters 36-38, Paul finally admits to himself that he has lost faith in a traditional personal God. He comes to believe that his embrace of a "heavenly father" was more about meeting emotional needs than it was about the true nature of God. But losing faith in a personal God is exceptionally difficult for him. How did you react to this part of Paul's ongoing loss of faith? Can you relate to Paul's struggle? Do you think it is possible to be a person of faith without believing in a personal, "heavenly father" kind of God?

## **Church Community (Chapter 47)**

By chapter 47, Paul has been out of church for several years. But he has an experience that makes him miss Christian community, friendship, and support. Bill argues that a person can give up traditional theology but still connect to a faith community in order to have friends for the journey. Do you think a person who has lost traditional faith should stick with the church? Why or why not? If not, where can a person find those kinds of nurturing friendships?

## **Deconstruction of Old Faith (Chapter 48)**

In chapter 48, Paul reviews faith he has lost. Review some of these with your small group (religious-right fundamentalism, the doctrine of hell, the atoning death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, the "rapture," having no hope for non-Christian persons, judgmentalism, providence, miracles, the divinity of Christ, and a personal God). Can you relate to losing some of these elements of faith? What beliefs of traditional Christianity have you lost, if any? What elements of orthodox Christianity are you unsure about?

## **Reconstruction of New Faith (Chapter 49)**

In chapter 49, Paul affirms faith he does hold, including a life-force/love-force God, a God of mystery and ambiguity, a human Jesus of compassion and service, and many Christian values and practices. He tells Bill that he believes in “Jesusanity,” following the human Jesus more than the divine Christ. How did you respond to that? What do you think of Paul’s non-traditional faith? Is he still a Christian? Does his reconstructed faith trouble you, or appeal to you, or both?