

In The Name of Jesus

by Henri Nouwen

a study guide

by

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Introduction to the Book

This book contains reflections on what Nouwen considers to be the essential characteristics of Christian leadership for the 21st century. His thoughts are rooted in:

A. His own experience of leaving Harvard and working at the Daybreak community for mentally handicapped persons in Toronto.

B. The temptation of Jesus in the desert

and

C. The call of Peter to ministry by Jesus.

The book is divided in three major parts, with a prologue and epilogue. For each part, Nouwen identifies a temptation that could potentially derail Christian leaders in the 21st century, shows how that temptation is the same as what Jesus faced in the desert, and suggests a spiritual discipline we need to adopt to help overcome that temptation. The spiritual discipline he suggests is rooted in the passage in John where Jesus commissions Peter.

Questions from the Prologue:

1. Nouwen says that it is “far from easy to come up with a sane perspective on Christian leadership in the 21st century.” Why do you think he says that?
2. In your mind, what are the essential characteristics that 21st century leaders need to have?
3. Discuss the importance of “ministry in the present” and its challenges.
4. Discuss the importance of “ministry two by two” and the obstacles to that.

Questions from the Introduction:

1. Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus? What will it take for us as individuals to become closer to Jesus in this next year?
2. “Everybody was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger.” Can you relate to that? Tell why.
3. Discuss the difficulty of making the move to ministry that may be considered “marginal to the needs of our society.”

Questions from Part I-- "From Relevance to Prayer"

A. *The Temptation: To be Relevant*

1. What makes "being relevant" a temptation? Why would "being relevant" be something we would want to avoid?
2. In what ways do we succumb to the temptation of relevance? As individuals, as a ministry?
3. Talk about what life would be like for you if none of the skills you currently possess would be of use or helpful to others...
4. In what ways do we find our identity in the things that we are good for, the things that we do?
5. Discuss the link between "receiving a new identity" and "coming to grips with our uselessness."
6. "These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments." Why is this kind of "breaking" necessary for us? Discuss ways that we fall into the old "relevant self." Discuss what we need to do to embrace the new "unadorned self."
7. What does Nouwen mean when he says, "...I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant..." Discuss the challenges we face to this charge.
8. In what ways do we counter this message: "that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish..."

B. *The Question: "Do You Love Me?"*

1. In what ways do we reinforce these unhelpful questions: "How many people take [me] seriously? How much [am I] going to accomplish? Can [I] show some results?"
2. What do I need to do to reinforce this question: "Am I in love with Jesus? Do I know the incarnate God?"
3. How does this second set of questions help us overcome the temptation to be relevant?
4. "The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, and resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and support that we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses, and friends." In what ways do we settle for this "second love"?
5. Nouwen describes God's first love as being a love "without any conditions or limits." What kind of implications does a first-hand knowledge of this love have on our personal lives and ministry? How can we intentionally embrace God's first love and avoid dependence on the conditional second love of others?

C. The Discipline: Contemplative Prayer

1. What does “contemplative prayer” have to do with embracing the first love of Jesus and resisting the temptation of relevance?
2. Do you agree with Nouwen’s statement that “the leader of the future must become a mystic”? Why or why not? Why is Nouwen convinced that the leader of the future must become a mystic?
3. Contemplative prayer is “the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, ‘Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?’” Describe an experience that you’ve had when you’ve dwelt in God’s presence this way. Is this a regular part of your life?
4. Nouwen says: “It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?” In what ways do we reinforce the first set of qualities in leadership and ignore the second set of qualities?
5. Discuss the statement: “For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.”

Questions from Part II-- "From Popularity to Ministry"

A. *The Temptation: To Be Spectacular*

1. In what ways do you struggle with this temptation?
2. When you give in to this temptation, what does it look like for you?
3. In what ways does giving into this temptation kill real "ministry"?
4. Discuss the obstacles (internal and external) to "shared ministry."
5. In what ways do we believe or behave as though "ministry is an individual affair"?
6. Can you identify with this: "...most of us still feel that, if we have anything at all to show, it is something we have to do solo...most of us still feel that, ideally, we should [be] able to do it all and do it successfully." (p.39)
7. In what ways do we act as though the statement in question 6 were true of us? In what ways do we adopt the "image...of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone"?

B. *The Task: "Feed My Sheep"*

1. In Nouwen's mind, what does "feed my sheep" entail? How would you summarize what he's getting at here?
2. Nouwen opens this section by noting: "Having been assured of Peter's love, Jesus gives him the task of ministry." In what ways do we skip the part about "loving Jesus"?

Consider the following statement which reminds us of part I: "If you don't love Jesus you will soon discover that being a pastor or a church leader is not really a very good job. You will be overworked, underpaid, overstressed, and underappreciated. But if you do love Jesus, you will discover as so many others have that it can be the most wonderful and exciting job in the world."

Mark Allan Powell, addressing graduating seniors at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio

3. Compare what Nouwen means when he lists ministry as a "communal experience" and a "mutual experience."
4. In what ways does this help us counteract the "temptation to be spectacular"?
5. Discuss the difficulties and the obstacles to doing ministry "communally" and "mutually".

C. *The Discipline: Confession and Forgiveness*

1. What does the discipline of confession have to do with "feed my sheep" and overcoming "the temptation to be spectacular"?
2. Would you agree with the statement: "Ministers are the least confessing people in the Christian community."? What do you think of that? Can you identify with that?

3. How can we avoid the discipline of confession becoming mere ritual in our lives and help embrace it as “real encounter”?

4. How can we incorporate the discipline of confession into our lives as individuals and into our larger life as a church?

5. What will be required of us to overcome obstacles like the following when it comes to incorporating confession in an authentic way:

- Fear
- Distance
- Generalization
- Too little listening
- Too much talking

Questions from Part III-- From Leading to Being Led

A. The Temptation: To be Powerful

1. In what ways can you relate to this statement? "Somehow I had come to believe that growing older and more mature meant that I would be increasingly able to offer leadership."
2. In what ways are you discovering that you are not in control? Do you find that to be a comforting thing or mostly a disturbing thing?
3. Discuss ways people in your ministry do not "cooperate" with what you want them to do. How do you typically respond to this?
4. What do you think Nouwen means when he says that "leadership, for a large part, means to be led?"
5. What kinds of things are you learning from the people you are leading?
6. Why do you think Nouwen makes this statement? "...the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat."

B. The Challenge: "Somebody Else Will Take You"

1. What would it look like for you to give leadership by allowing yourself to be led?
2. What are some ways you can practically embrace "powerlessness" in your current ministry?
3. Why do you think Nouwen makes such a big deal out of "powerlessness" and "being led by others"?

C. The Discipline: Theological Reflection

1. What does theological reflection have to do with "being led" and embracing "powerlessness"?
2. Why does Nouwen propose theological reflection as an "antidote" to the problem stated in this chapter?
3. What does "theological reflection" entail?
4. In what ways can you practically embrace the discipline of theological reflection in the next year?

Questions from the Conclusion

1. In what ways do you look to “being relevant, popular, and powerful as ingredients of an effective ministry?”
2. Reflect on and discuss these three images: the praying leader, the vulnerable leader, the trusting leader.

Questions from the Epilogue

1. What “Bill” do you have in your life and ministry? In what ways can you allow your “Bill” to lead and teach you?
2. In what ways can we learn from/ relate to this scene:
“After I had finished reading my text and people had shown their appreciation, Bill said to me, ‘Henri, can I say something now?’ My first reaction was, ‘Oh, how am I going to handle this? He might start rambling and create an embarrassing situation,’ but then I caught myself in my presumption that he had nothing of importance to say and said to the audience, ‘Will you please sit down. Bill would like to say a few words to you.’ Bill took the microphone and said, with all the difficulties he has in speaking, ‘Last time, when Henri went to Boston, he took John Smeltzer with him. This time he wanted me to come with him to Washington, and I am very glad to be here with you. Thank you very much.’ That was it, and everyone stood up and gave him warm applause.”