

DOWN

How is the Gospel

WITH THIS

Good News in

SORT OF

Contemporary Ireland?

THING

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

# INTRODUCTION

This discussion guide accompanies the book 'Down with This Sort of Thing'. It can be used in different settings from pairs, to informal sets of friends to more structured discussion groups.

The book's subtitle is 'How is the Gospel good news in contemporary Ireland?' It explores the culture of modern Ireland and attempts to connect the good news of Jesus, expressed in His life, teaching and death, to this culture. These are wide ranging topics and culture is not monolithic but contains many subcultures. So please allow your conversation to go in the direction that is appropriate for the whole group.

## USING THIS GUIDE

1. **Read** -- Each participant should read the appropriate chapter of the book before the group meets.
2. **Relax** -- When the group meets together, a relaxed environment should be created, via conversation and food or drink.
3. **Discuss** -- This guide provides 10-12 questions for each chapter of the book. These don't have to be followed slavishly; instead the conversation should flow with the interests of the group. There are both cultural questions and faith questions and it is important to discuss both sets.
4. **Watch / Listen** -- Within each chapter, a cultural resource is provided, such as a short video or story, to aid the discussion.
5. **Apply** -- After the discussion section it is suggested to close with some personal application. This may focus on content in the chapter which spoke to the participants or which leaves the participants with an action point.

# CHAPTER 1: GOD AND THE CULTURES OF MODERN IRELAND

In your discussion group, please share briefly how long you have lived in Ireland, the faith tradition or none you grew up in, and why you are reading this book.

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

1. Chapter one of the book paints a brief sketch of the 'old religious Ireland'. Which elements of this resonate with today's cultural perception of religion and Ireland's recent past?
2. What else would you add to the list?
3. In what ways do you see similarities between the old Ireland and the older brother?
4. Likewise, in what ways do you see similarities between the new Ireland and the younger brother?
5. What factors do you think explain this cultural change in attitudes to religion and faith in Ireland?

*"If this parallel is accurate, then it changes the simple western narrative of a religious nation losing its faith as it modernises and becomes more progressive."*

## FAITH QUESTIONS

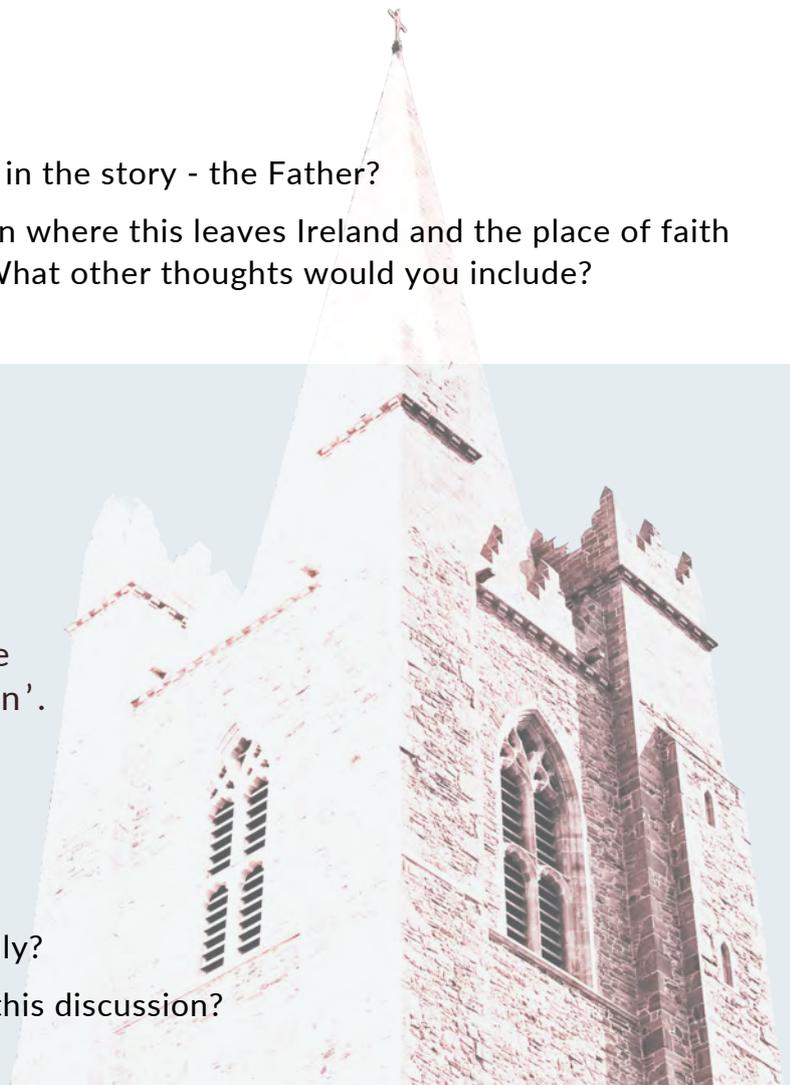
6. What strikes you about the third character in the story - the Father?
7. The chapter closes with some reflections on where this leaves Ireland and the place of faith today. How much do you agree with these? What other thoughts would you include?

## EXERCISE

Spend some time in quietness looking at Rembrandt's painting 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'.

## APPLICATION

8. What in this chapter spoke to you personally?
9. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?



# CHAPTER 2: THE REFERENDUM ON THE EIGHTH AMENDMENT AS A CULTURAL MOMENT

In your discussion group, please note that this chapter is a cultural commentary, not a moral commentary, on the referendum. Your group should agree together at the start of your session that your discussion will follow the same trajectory.

## EXERCISE

Read the influencing factors for both Yes and No voters in the referendum, on the last 2 columns of p129 of the RTÉ Exit Poll.

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

1. Choice was cited as the main reason behind the 'Yes' vote in the referendum. How does that match your own memories of interactions during the campaign?
2. The book argues that this desire for 'choice' had a distinct anti-religious flavor. In what ways was that true of your own experience?
3. Furthermore, it argues that "nuanced debate about competing rights was largely absent" from the campaign. How accurate is that comment?
4. If so, what do you think it tells us about contemporary Ireland?

*"Our desire for choice is driven by our lack of choice in the past. It is centred on issues where we were once told what to do; rebellion is at the heart of our yearning for choice."*

## FAITH QUESTIONS

5. The book describes a 'Christendom' model of Christian faith. How appropriate do you think cultural engagement through lobbying and legislation is? What might be some of the downsides?
6. In what ways does the contemporary church still practice parts of the 'Christendom' model?
7. The author outlines the 'Jesus way' as an alternative. How biblical do you think this is?
8. What lessons should the Irish church today draw from all this?

## APPLICATION

9. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?
10. How will this change how you speak of your own faith, and relate it to matters of public concern?

# CHAPTER 3: FAITH IN A POST-RELIGIOUS CULTURE

## FAITH QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that Jesus is referring to the Pharisees in John 10, and calling them “thieves and robbers”? How significant is that?
2. In what way do Jesus and Paul argue that religion can make matters worse (e.g. Matthew 23 & Philippians 3)?
3. How do the Scriptures explain the presence of both good and bad examples within the church?

## EXERCISE

Take a look at the Irish Times cartoon of Bishop Eamonn Casey.

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

4. Where can you see elements of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day in the religious experience of Ireland?
5. Where was self-righteousness visible in the Irish church? Is it still present today, or perceived to be?
6. How can the contemporary church define itself in opposition to the ‘religious’, like Jesus does in John 10?
7. What characteristics of the Good Shepherd would connect with today’s Ireland?
8. Is there a sense in which the Irish church has been judged? What hope might there be for the church?

*“How can the Irish church represent a Good Shepherd like Jesus, when it is tarred by the actions of thieves and robbers from it's past?”*

## APPLICATION

9. Where did you feel any personal challenge to your own faith in this chapter?
10. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?

# CHAPTER 4: OBEDIENCE IN A POST-AUTHORITY CULTURE

## FAITH QUESTIONS

1. Where does Scripture suggest that the Kingship of Jesus is at the heart of the good news?
2. What does this Kingship mean for freedom from sin?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus? And why would that be good for us?
4. How do you reconcile Jesus as a leader/King, with a Jesus who offers us personal connection with Him?

## EXERCISE

Watch the video of first time hang gliders on the Remarkables.

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

5. In what ways has skepticism increased, and trust decreased, in Ireland recently?
6. How does this apply to matters of religion and faith?
7. How can the church explain to contemporary culture that we are not free?
8. Handing authority over your life to someone else strikes at a prime value of our age. How can the church positively connect values of trust and obedience with Irish culture?
9. How can obedience to Jesus be presented in a non-, or even anti-, religious fashion?

*“It was obedience that led to transformation and to freedom from their past lives. Obedience can mean freedom. It can be good news.”*

## APPLICATION

10. In what way have you found it difficult to keep obedience to Jesus central to your own faith, in our present culture?
11. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?

# CHAPTER 5: REAL FREEDOM IN A LIBERAL CULTURE

## FAITH QUESTIONS

1. How do the Scriptures use the image of slavery to describe humanity? (e.g. Galatians 4, Romans 6)
2. In what way can we say that “Jesus turns out to be less demanding than the gods of our age, because of His grace”?
3. How does the Christian focus on character offer a greater freedom?

## EXERCISE

Reread the paragraph in the book describing the 'I'm not a fascist. I'm a priest' scene from Father Ted.

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

4. In which aspects of modern Irish society do you see the presence of striving, pressure and performance?
5. How can our culture connect with the thought that “freedom is more than choice”?
6. How strong is the link between consumerism and our culture’s devotion to freedom?
7. How does our culture balance freedom with other core values like relationships and justice, in its rhetoric but also in its daily practice?
8. How well does the contemporary Irish church present a picture of freedom to its society?
9. What stops the Irish church from presenting a better picture of freedom?

*“We have dropped the load of ‘should have’ but shoulder instead the weight of ‘could have’.”*

## APPLICATION

10. How do you experience your faith as ‘freedom’?
11. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?

# CHAPTER 6: GOD IN AN EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

## EXERCISE

Listen to the song 'Let it go' from the film Frozen.

## FAITH QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does God reveal Himself to human beings?
2. How significant is it that many of these are internal to people?
3. Do you think the Scriptures teach a universal desire for justice within humanity? Where?
4. How does Ecclesiastes 3v11 imply a desire for meaning inside the human heart?
5. What other internal desires does Scripture speak of?

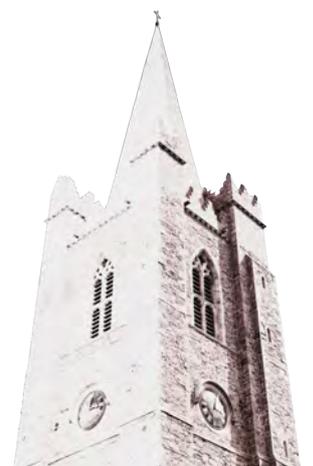
*“All of these desires are pointers to God. While we try to fulfil these desires elsewhere, they are still not fully being met. These desires are connection points between faith and our culture.”*

## CULTURAL QUESTIONS

6. Where do you see the idea of expressive individualism displayed in Ireland today?
7. How can the church positively connect with our culture's attraction to human rights?
8. Where does our present culture find meaning?
9. What other contemporary desires do you think are connection points for the good news?

## APPLICATION

10. How do you relate your own personal faith to all of your internal desires?
11. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?



# CHAPTER 7: JESUS IN A PROGRESSIVE CULTURE

## EXERCISE

Take two minutes to slowly read, and then reflect on, Pete Greig's quote on The Incarnation.

### JESUS WAS AND IS A PERSON

1. Why is the Incarnation significant, according to the Scriptures?
2. In your experience, how has the humanity of Jesus been underplayed in Irish faith practice?
3. How is the personhood of Jesus important in a post-religious culture?

### JESUS ACCEPTED ALL PEOPLE

4. To what extent has acceptance become a prime value in Ireland today? Please give examples.
5. How fair is the author's account of the weaknesses of our culture's view of acceptance?
6. How was Jesus' acceptance of people in His day deeper than our contemporary acceptance?
7. How could the church articulate the acceptance of Jesus so that it connects with our culture's desire for tolerance?

*"It doesn't go far enough. The third way of Jesus is to welcome outsiders not just into society, by removing discriminating legislation, but to actually welcome them into our own lives."*

### JESUS IN A SPIRITUAL CULTURE

8. Where do you sense a growing interest in 'spirituality' in our time?
9. In what way can this spirituality collapse into a 'spirituality of self'?
10. What can Jesus offer His followers in this search for a spiritual life?

### APPLICATION

11. What challenged you personally as you read this chapter?
12. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?

# CHAPTER 8: SALVATION IN A SCEPTICAL CULTURE

## AN EXPANSIVE SALVATION

1. Do the Scriptures teach a narrow salvation of individuals or a broader salvation of the whole world? Discuss.
2. How does a broad 'recreation' perspective help re-frame the good news for our present context?

## AN ORDINARY SALVATION

3. In what ways does Christian salvation impact our ordinary lives now?
4. How is this different from the Irish religious stereotype? In what ways can this perspective help people gain a fresh understanding of faith?

### EXERCISE

Watch 'The Simpsons' scene where nuns are running a crèche.

## A GENUINE SALVATION

5. In your experience what do non-church people think of the concept of sin?
6. What different metaphors for sin do the Scriptures present?
7. Which metaphor do you tend to elevate in your own mind? Why?
8. How can these different metaphors connect the idea of sin with contemporary culture?

*"The question is thrown at us: what is the root of the struggle and alienation of modern life? We sense there is something wrong with the world, before we ask if we're a part of it."*

## A COSTLY SALVATION

9. How does using different metaphors for the atonement reduce or deepen our understanding of Jesus' death?
10. How do these diverse pictures connect with different aspects of our culture?

## APPLICATION

11. In what area covered by this chapter does your own understanding of the faith need rebalancing?
12. What will you do differently as a result of this discussion?

# APPENDIX

## LINKS FOR EACH EXERCISE

**Chapter 1** | Spend some time in quietness looking at Rembrandt's painting 'The Return of The Prodigal Son'

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/rembrandt/the-return-of-the-prodigal-son-1669>

**Chapter 2** | Read the influencing factors for both Yes and No voters in the referendum, on the last 2 columns of p129 of the RTÉ Exit Poll

<https://static.rasset.ie/documents/news/2018/05/rte-exit-poll-final-11pm.pdf>

**Chapter 3** | Take a look at the Irish Times cartoon of Bishop Eamonn Casey

<https://www.michaelnugent.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Casey.jpg>

**Chapter 4** | Watch the video of first time hang gliders on the Remarkables

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrf\\_GYi-9F4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrf_GYi-9F4)

**Chapter 5** | Reread the paragraph in the book describing the 'I'm not a fascist. I'm a priest' scene from Father Ted - p44 in the book, or, even better, watch the scene if you have a copy.

**Chapter 6** | Listen to the song 'Let it go' from the film Frozen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moSFlvxnbgk>

**Chapter 7** | Take two minutes to slowly read, and then reflect on, Pete Greig's quote on The Incarnation - p66 in the book.

**Chapter 8** | Watch 'The Simpsons' scene where nuns are running a crèche

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftrPvM7V6YI>

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