

THIS IS

NOT

YOUR

OWN

STUDY GUIDE





## INSTRUCTIONS

The following are a series of questions to be used in small group studies of my book, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World*. I have designed these questions to provoke earnest self-reflection. If this book will do any good to anyone, it will only come when readers see themselves in the text and recognize how they are affected by and contribute to the lie that “we are our own.” I ask that you read the book with a posture of humility, not humility towards me, the author, but towards whatever truths might be found in the book.

By “humility” I have in mind an openness to the ideas. And this may not be easy and probably won’t be comfortable. I’d just ask you to entertain the possibility that our society is inhuman, that you have been shaped by the lie that we are our own, and that the church is complicit in perpetuating this false anthropology. If you cannot see yourself in the situations and tensions I describe, try to imagine how people close to you might have experienced them. I suspect that if you look closely enough, you will discover many loved ones who struggle to bear the unbearable burden of being a modern person. But I also suspect that you also share this struggle, although it may be harder to see.

Whatever you do, try to avoid dismissing the problems I address just because you haven’t personally experienced them. Maybe my analysis of culture is biased or exaggerated or too pessimistic. That’s entirely possible. I’m wrong sometimes, as people on the Internet like to remind me. But you’ll only be able to judge the accuracy of my analysis and you’ll only be able to learn something if you are open to the possibility that this book captures the experience of many contemporary people in the West. I believe that if you read with openness and humility, you will understand our world, your neighbors, and God’s grace better than when you began.



## INTRODUCTION

“We weren’t made to live like this, and most of us know it. But either we don’t care, or we don’t think we can do anything about it. So, the mode that best describes our day-to-day experience is “survival.” (1)

1. When do you find yourself in “survival mode”? During the holidays? At the end of the week? Every after?
2. Do you find yourself using coping statements like, “I just need to get through the day”?
3. If you find yourself in “survival mode” regularly, what is the cause? Are you just making bad life choices? Or is it a result of the Fall? Or is it because you are sacrificing for others? Or is it the consequence of social forces outside your control?
4. Do you think it’s normal, healthy, and how God designed us to live in perpetual (or regular) “survival mode”?
5. What are ways you “self-medicate” to get through the day? For now, let’s set aside discussions about whether any specific coping strategy is healthy or appropriate. Just try to identify what those strategies are. We’ll evaluate them later.



## CHAPTER ONE: I AM MY OWN AND BELONG TO MYSELF

1. As you read through the examples of the inhuman conditions of the modern world (Incels, Stay-at-Home-Moms, the Mentally Ill, and so on), which resonated with you the most? Can you see how that problem is related to the belief that we are our own?
2. What other examples came to mind and how might they also be traced back to the lie that we are our own?
3. Which of the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging weigh on you the most (Justification, Identity, Meaning, Values, or Belonging)? Where do you see yourself overwhelmed with the effort to bear this responsibility?
4. Where have you felt pressured to justify your life by having a purpose, achieving greatness, becoming the best version of yourself, or similar sentiments? How did you respond?
5. What does it mean to have an “identity”? When have you doubted your identity and how did you respond?
6. Zygmunt Bauman says that we live in a “liquid” society where everything, including social norms and values, are constantly shifting. When have you felt uncertain about what is morally acceptable because values have shifted in society?



## CHAPTER TWO: HOW SOCIETY HELPS YOU BE YOUR OWN

1. When you have had a difficult, confusing, or incredible experience, how did you try to understand the “meaning” of the event? For example, after a bad break up, did you use music to make sense of it?
2. What are some techniques that you feel pressured to adopt? It could be anything from a budgeting system to an exercise plan to a parenting style.
3. According to Jacques Ellul, technique makes efficiency the only truly important value. How have the techniques you have adopted or been pressured to adopt asked you to sacrifice other values like love, joy, truth, goodness, or beauty?
4. At what point is the drive for efficiency a problem?
5. Which matters more to you: the modern freedom to leave communities/places/people or the freedom to deeply belong to communities/places/people?



## CHAPTER THREE: HOW SOCIETY FAILS US

1. One of the central arguments of St. Augustine's great work, *City of God* is that pagan gods are failures even by their own standards (I owe this observation to Tim Keller). The Roman gods offered protection and provision to those who worshiped and sacrificed to them, and yet Roman cities were sacked, the worshipers were slaughtered, and the pagan temples were destroyed. This is what false gods do: they make us promises they can never fulfill. So what about the idols of the contemporary world? What promises do they make us? How do they fail to keep those promises? And why do people continue to go back to these idols even when they keep failing us? For an example, see the discussion of pornography at the beginning of this chapter.
2. Where do you see competition creeping into spaces that have traditionally been mostly non-competitive? How does an awareness of competition change your motives and experiences? For an example, see the discussion of maximizing fuel efficiency on page
3. If we were to decide that "meritocracy" (a society where everyone rises or falls based on their own efforts) is a destructive illusion, do we have to reject all personal responsibility? Are there alternatives to both "pulling yourself up by your bootstrap" and blaming society for all our problems?
4. Which do you tend towards, Affirmation or Resignation? Why?
5. Teachers, leaders, role models, and parents often tell young people that they can achieve their dreams if they just work hard enough. Do you think it's ethical for us to encourage kids to have an Affirming mindset like this if we know that our society is not designed for human flourishing?



## CHAPTER FOUR: WE ALL SELF-MEDICATE

1. Stigmatized coping mechanisms are usually easy to name: substance abuse, pornography, gambling, and so on. But socially acceptable coping mechanisms are harder to identify because they tend to be close to home. Other than the ones listed in chapter 4, what are some common socially acceptable coping mechanisms? What makes them a coping mechanism? Do you think these behaviors are ever morally acceptable? (98)
2. What are some technological advances in your life that have come with negative unintended consequences? How did you decide whether to keep the technology or revert to older techniques? (For example, maybe you discovered that social media is an addictive way to keep up with friends, so you reverted to calling friends on the phone). (101)
3. Has it generally been your experience that most people you meet are “bearing some unspoken burden”? Why aren’t people comfortable sharing their problems? (103)
4. Can you actually rest? If not, why not? For example, are your vacations shaped by a drive to be efficient with your time, to have the most fun or see the most sights or experience the most things possible? If so, have you ever felt rested afterwards? (107)

Think about a technique that you use to solve a significant problem in your life. It could be a medication, a diet, a reading plan, a leadership strategy, a parenting style, an exercise, or any other technique.

Now ask yourself, Is that technique solving a problem caused by another technique? For example, I just took an anti-inflammatory medication (a technique) to cope with the pain (tennis elbow) caused by another technique (using a laptop to write).

Let’s take it one step further: Could the technique you use to cope with the problems caused by another technique cause *further* problems which you *also* solve with a technique? For example, the long-term use of an anti-inflammatory might damage my kidneys which will require treatment with a medical technique. (111)

5. Are we stuck in an endless cycle of techniques solving problems created by techniques? Should we give up and accept this as the cost of living in a fallen world?



## CHAPTER FIVE: YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN BUT BELONG TO CHRIST

1. How does it feel when you hear the phrase “I am not my own”? Does it make sense to you that belonging to another could be a source of comfort?  
When and where have you struggled to accept and respect an authority? Why?  
We may be tempted to think of skepticism towards authority figures as pride or arrogance, but how might it be a reasonable response for some people? How can you invite people who are skeptical to see how comforting it is to belong to God rather than yourself? (122-126)
2. What is the difference between someone saying, “Your life is special because you are unique” and “Your life is special because it is a gift from God”? Why is the former unsatisfying even for people who are not Christian?
3. When we belong to ourselves, we live in the tension between the freedom to be whomever we choose and the crushing realization that we will always fall short. When we belong to God, we live in the tension between the freedom of grace and the crushing realization that we will always fall short. How is Christianity any different than living with the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging? (135)
4. How can “being a Christian” or “finding your identity in Christ” become just another lifestyle option rather than a deeply rooted identity? (138-142)
5. What is something that feels so deeply and inherently meaningful to you, that no naturalist explanation would be satisfying? For example, if someone told you they could completely “explain” *why* you “feel” that way (chemical reactions, hormones, evolutionary psychology, etc), you would tell them that there is still something *more* to the significance of the event or experience. (143-146)
6. What do you think it means for Christians to be called to “renunciation in affirmation not resignation”? (148)
7. What is a way you practice “prodigality”? If you can’t think of anything, what is a way you could practice it in the future? (151-153)
8. What are some ways you can practice belonging to God, the Church, your family, your city, or creation? Which of these spheres of belonging makes you most uncomfortable? Or which one would cost you the most if you faithfully practiced belonging? (153-159)





## CHAPTER SIX: WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. What are some God honoring but “less-good” ways you cope with the inhumanity of the modern world (and you don’t get to say “prayer” or “reading your Bible”—those aren’t “less-good” in any sense)? Do you have grace for yourself, or do you see these as “guilty pleasures”? (163-167)
2. We tend to overlook our strategies of coping and negatively judge other people’s methods. What are some “less-good” but potentially God honoring ways of coping that you disapprove of when you see other people practice them? (163-167)
3. Which are you better at, being still or knowing He is God? Why is it so hard to do both? (169-170)
4. How are cities (and we virtually all live in a city thanks to modern technology) human efforts to be self-sufficient, to “refus[e] the hand of God in [our lives]” (Ellul)? (172-174)
5. How can we “wait without [human] hope” that our society will improve? How can we accept God’s redemptive work without falling into passivity about the injustice and disorder in our society? (176-180)
6. What is an area of God’s design for our lives that you are tempted to see as a “personal preference”? (183-187) Which of these is hardest for you to accept as a part of belonging to God?
7. Ellul asks us to “agree not to do all [we are] capable of [doing].” Where do you practice this principle in your life? What are some responsible and reasonable places where you can practice it? Remember, the goal is not to make your life inefficient for the sake of being inefficient. That would be meaningless. We should act prodigally in a way that honors God, that values His creation, our neighbor, beauty, goodness, or truth. There is a great difference between being objectively wasteful and being wasteful in the eyes of the world. (191-193)
8. What do you think it means to practice politics “on a human scale”? (195)



## CHAPTER SEVEN: OUR ONLY COMFORT

1. If you began this book skeptical that belonging to anyone but yourself could be *good*, let alone a *comfort*, does it make sense now? In what ways can you recognize that belonging to yourself is actually no comfort at all? (198-199)
2. If we belong to anyone but God, they will eventually take advantage of us because one day their will and desires will be against our best interest. How is God different? (199)
3. How can Christ's burden be light if we have to carry our cross and die to ourselves daily? (200)
4. What is the most frightening aspect of death for you? Is it the pain, the things left undone, the fear of annihilation, doubts about God's faithfulness or existence? I understand these are not pleasant things to consider, but until we can identify our fears we cannot answer the most significant question: How does belonging to God give *you*, with *your specific fears*, comfort in death? (203-205)
5. Once we accept that the inhuman burden that society has placed upon us is not legitimate, how do we keep believing that truth? The culture will continue to pressure us to take up the Responsibilities of Self-Belonging. How can we encourage each other? How can we create communities that practice belonging to Christ in against the spirit of the culture?