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THE
Liturgy

SPIRITUAL
FORMATION
FOR THE
SAKE OF OUR
NEIGHBOR

OF
Politics



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Liturgy of Politics* by Kaitlyn Schiess.
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Apolitical OR Unexamined

WHAT SPIRITUAL FORMATION
HAS TO DO WITH POLITICS

[The church] cannot have an inner life without having at the same time a life which expresses itself outwardly as well. She cannot hear her Lord and not hear the groaning of the Creation.

KARL BARTH

I've spent my entire life in evangelical spaces: I grew up in a variety of evangelical churches as a nomadic military kid, attended a prominent evangelical university, and chose an evangelical seminary. For good or for ill, it wasn't until college that I really knew a world outside of the subculture I'd been raised in. While attending Liberty University, I experienced what I like to call "ideological whiplash." I spent my weekdays studying politics and history in a space still deeply influenced by a particular form of conservative political engagement while my weekends were occupied traveling the country to compete as part of a debate community strongly influenced by the kind of progressive politics my classes condemned. The more I moved back and forth between them, both the conservative and progressive spaces started to look more and more like the caricatures that one side painted of the other. I could see how reactive each side was, how much it defined

itself by opposition to the other, and how powerfully it compelled the loyalty of its particular communities. This personal experience prompted my exploration into the history at play here. And by the time the 2016 election was ramping up, many of my classmates and friends were also more closely examining the evangelical legacy we had inherited.

Liberty's founder and first president, Jerry Falwell Sr., was a pastor, televangelist, and the founder of a political advocacy organization called the Moral Majority. The organization was formed in the midst of a theological and political shift among American Protestants toward greater political involvement, often motivated by a perceived sense of moral decay in American culture. The Religious Right, or Christian Right, began to gain influence in the 1980s, and the Moral Majority was one expression of this trend. A variety of explanations exists for this surge in conservative activism among church leaders and lay Christians, but the predominant explanation goes like this: evangelicals were happily apolitical until *Roe v. Wade*, when, motivated by theological opposition to abortion, they entered into the political world, eventually adding other cultural issues to their platform. Yet historian Randall Balmer calls this the "abortion myth."¹ In reality, the 1974 Internal Revenue Service decision to revoke the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University, due to their ban on interracial dating, was the primary catalyst. Many private all-white schools or universities (often Christian) that were formed in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate public schools were similarly stripped of their tax-exempt status.² Conservative activist Paul Weyrich had tried to get evangelical leaders interested in political activism for years. In the end, Weyrich says that what changed their mind wasn't abortion or school prayer, but tax-exempt status for segregated schools.³

Eventually this burgeoning evangelical movement would foster an alliance with Catholics, Jews, and Mormons over a conservative approach to social issues, free market capitalism, and anticommunism.⁴ This development is important, as it moved the center of evangelical political energy from a limited focus on a few social issues into a

broader movement based on moral consensus among religious conservatives and a commitment to limited government.⁵ The growing network of theologically conservative churchgoers with newly acquired conservative political goals prompted an examination of a new voting bloc, with *Newsweek* declaring 1976 “The Year of the Evangelical.”⁶ While the movement seemed to empower Christians who felt their cultural power draining in the wake of the sexual revolution (evangelicals had “enough votes to run the country,”⁷ boasted televangelist Pat Robertson), the alliance would change them as much as they wanted to change the country. Evangelicals did not gain this sudden rush of political power by focusing on the narrow range of social issues that the “abortion myth” claims piqued their interest, but by tying their identity to a larger political movement that would ultimately achieve more foreign policy and economic goals than the social ones we’d like to believe began the movement.

Andy Crouch provides a helpful explanation for how the alliance between religious conservatives and the Republican party became so unbalanced. Evangelicals who felt their cultural power was waning sought out a source of power to give them authority again. But the Religious Right would never truly benefit from the deal because, as Crouch explains, this is how idols work. Idols “work less and less well and they actually demand more and more of you until eventually, when the idol has totally taken over your life, it’s not giving you anything it promised at the beginning, and it’s asking you to totally abdicate your image-bearing identity.”⁸ The social concerns that made evangelicals initially interested in this alignment have consistently been put on the back burner in favor of the economic and foreign policy goals that their support bought for conservative politicians. Evangelicals forged an attachment to a political party that knows it is the beneficiary of a lopsided bargain. Over the course of about twenty years, white American evangelicals solidified a particular approach to political engagement largely based in a partnership with the Republican party. This partnership moved from a strategic alliance (we’ll support your favored

policies if you support ours) to a single coherence: Christian = Republican. The idol demanded more and more of us until we abdicated our true identities for a false one.

This is the world in which many young Christians grew up—unaware of how exactly we got here, but fully immersed in a religious subculture with strong political elements. And the 2016 election of Donald Trump prompted backlash from young believers precisely because of this subculture.

They felt betrayed by leaders who had touted the importance of the moral character of politicians and deceived when they read the Bible and discovered that conservative economic and foreign policy principles didn't fly off its pages. Younger Christians have never tasted the kind of cultural power that previous generations watched deteriorate. The “culture war” approach is unappealing to a generation thoroughly accustomed to a world that labels their religious beliefs “irrelevant” or “backward.” Instead, many are looking for political engagement that wrestles with the difficulty of applying theological convictions to public life and an approach to culture that does more than condemn.

“Too Political”

In response to the backlash from young Christians, and the widespread political division in the church, many public leaders try to avoid the topic of politics entirely. Lobbing a claim of “getting political” communicates that someone is unnecessarily divisive, harboring ulterior motives, or is stepping outside the bounds of their role. After Lysa TerKeurst, president of Proverbs 31 Ministries and a popular speaker and author, visited the White House for a conversation about “families, religious non-profits, and women,” she promised her Instagram followers that: “This wasn't a political trip. It was just an everyday gal who loves Jesus being given a seat at the table.”⁹ We're so averse to the “political” that we'll deny our involvement in it even from one of the greatest seats of political power in the world.

Political is practically a dirty word. It's constantly pitted against the gospel, as if anything political stands in opposition to mere faithful

living. We haggle over what counts as a political issue—marking out boundaries that include the issues we’d rather avoid and including all the ones where disagreement won’t be tolerated. We even proudly declare issues that require legislative solutions as “not political” when we think they should be supported by everyone. We conflate “political” and “partisan,” and we isolate legislative and electoral means of social engagement as the only ones tainted by sin.

Any human system will have its flaws, and no human system should receive our ultimate loyalty. We will be sorely disappointed if we put our hope in fallible and imperfect institutions. Government systems—local or national—suffer the same effects of sin that any other human system does. Instead of isolating them as lower, grungier places of human activity, we should recognize them as spaces to live into our creative capacity as humans.

When I tell new friends that I write about faith and politics, they are almost universally enthusiastic. “Oh, we need Christians doing that!” “Bless your heart, that’s important.” “What necessary work!” The conversation usually ends there. We all think, in theory, that talking about the relationship between our faith and political participation is important, but very few actually want to have the conversation. We love the *idea* of hard and messy conversations, but we’re usually afraid to take the risks involved in actually broaching these topics with the people around us.

Perhaps surprisingly, this impulse toward maligning the political is actually consistent with the political legacy young evangelicals have inherited. The common criticism of the Moral Majority and Religious Right is that it made the Christian faith “too political” by tying our faith to political positions. But perhaps the problem with too closely aligning our faith and a particular strain of conservative politics isn’t that the movement was “too political,” but that it was actually insufficiently political.

Instead of directly dealing with the complex questions of sorting out what our theological convictions look like in public and seeing our

political education as part and parcel of our theological education, we've outsourced. We're afraid of "getting political"—but we aren't afraid of letting others do the "dirty work" for us. Many of our leaders have—implicitly or explicitly—communicated that there are a set of approved conservative sources that will give us the guidance we need—not just in policy details, but in the kind of philosophy that should motivate our participation. That's why the history is important: we solidified a relationship that was meant to be useful to deal with immediate political concerns, but it turned into a dependent relationship on an outside source for education about our ultimate values.

Even when we recognize the role of Christian leaders in guiding our political training, we still place our political education on the shoulders of Christian parachurch organizations. During my time working for a local church, we hosted an event that was advertised as a series of simulcast talks intended to spark conversations about our cultural moment. It was broadcast all over the country, into local churches that were offered simple guidelines on how to host the event. Many of us on staff were excited to introduce the congregation to topics that we knew they would otherwise avoid, like race, economics, and politics. At the end of the night, we realized how misguided our hopes had been. The topics were given none of the necessary introduction, because a nationally simulcast talk couldn't know everyone's background or the contexts they were living in. We had no real strategy for continuing the conversations, and we felt no responsibility to defend anything that might rub up against the political preferences of the congregation, because it wasn't our event. We had no skin in the game.

We wanted to check a box. Political engagement: check. Our fear of "getting political" had landed our congregation in the same spot that the Moral Majority had placed them in: we lacked adequate resources to discern how to politically engage with the world around us.

So, even for those of us weary of a legacy we may have had no part in shaping, the call is clear: we have to get political.

Brains and Bodies

In one of my seminary classes, we had one large project to work on throughout the whole semester: designing a ministry plan, with all the hypothetical details. I decided to create a plan for a church to intentionally introduce political training into the regular life of the church. Part of the project required that we research and select a curriculum. I read the descriptions and table of contents for dozens of curricula, surprised to find an abundance of options. Most of them promised to teach Christians how to “engage the culture” and “change the world.” Yet not only did these studies severely limit the scope of necessary political education for Christians, they also almost exclusively focused on explaining the “biblical” position on a select number of issues. Rather than offering a robust theological basis for understanding human government, our obligations to it as strangers and sojourners in this world, and the limitations and possibilities of creative political work, they took a laundry list of current political issues and matched them to Bible verses. Many of the options were commendable, but they shed light on the expectations of most church leaders: hit all the hot-button issues and give us the right answers to a few pressing political problems. If this was all Christians had to guide them, they might know where they should stand on a few policies, but they would have no idea why government exists, what our relationship to it should be, or how to faithfully engage with the sticky political problems of the future. I ended up using this part of my project to explain why an entirely new curriculum needed to be written.

Decades of political disagreement among American Christians should remind us that there’s no easy “what the Bible says” about politics, to say nothing about centuries of disagreement among Christians around the world. Even a more comprehensive theological approach will fall flat if it relies exclusively on giving us a new set of facts and beliefs. We’re constantly learning more about how embodied our learning and thinking is, and Christians are beginning to connect this scientific research with a truth we’ve always known: we aren’t just “brains on a stick.”

Philosopher James K. A. Smith has been credited for a resurgence in evangelical thinking about the “liturgies” that form us—the embodied habits, practices, and corporate pedagogies that we repeatedly participate in. Instead of thinking of humans as primarily thinking beings, he has argued (as Augustine and others before him) that we are primarily loving beings, motivated and driven by the things we have learned to love. Learning is not a purely cognitive process by which we gain information about the things we love and then make logical decisions based on that knowledge. Instead, this learning usually looks more like picking up implicit messages about the “good life” through the things we habitually consume, watch, experience, and rehearse with our bodies.

Smith’s paradigm is a helpful lens for looking at the places and habits that are most spiritually formative, and they are often found outside of the church. The contemporary evangelical church has often failed to grasp the formative power of the cultural artifacts we consume and use outside of the church while letting the repeated actions and artifacts inside of the church go largely unexamined. We try to speak to people deeply formed by images, emotions, bodily practices, and ritualistic experiences outside of the church with a set of sermon points to learn. As Smith says, we’re “pouring water on our head to put out a fire in our heart.”¹⁰

This lens for looking at the forces that are most spiritually formative (and the necessary counterformative practices) is an approach that we desperately need to use in our conversations about political theology. Other areas of Christian living may require embodied practices that teach us how and what to love, but if politics is that mucky realm we only enter into out of necessity, we’re not likely to give it the same level of attention. I’ve become convinced, however, that one of the most important tasks for the evangelical church in America is to examine our spiritual formation in a political direction. I use that phrase, “spiritual formation in a political direction,” in two ways: the ways we are spiritually formed by the political forces

around us, and the ways our intentional spiritual formation practices form us in political ways.

The word *direction* is important. We tend to compartmentalize, splitting our theological and political convictions. Instead, both have a moral and spiritual element, and neither are content to stay in their own corners. The ideas we gain in one area have underlying values with their own gravitational pull, breaking out of the boxes we put them in. Political values don't stay political; they become ultimate. We often treat our political convictions as if they operate on a lower rung than our theological convictions. We can value wealth or security on this lower political level while maintaining that on a higher spiritual level we value God's kingdom. But our political tendencies and practices influence more than this lower realm—they inevitably fight for dominance in our lives. The things we do in a voting booth and a church pew alike will shape the values we hold.

These connections between our spiritual formation and our political participation often go unexamined in our churches and communities. In February 2017, a long list of prominent evangelicals signed a joint letter criticizing President Trump's executive order temporarily banning travelers from seven nations, indefinitely ending the acceptance of Syrian refugees, and reducing the total number of refugees to be admitted into the country. Influential conservative leaders like Tim Keller and Ed Stetzer were among the signees.

And yet, just a few weeks after the letter was published, Pew Research released data showing that 76 percent of white evangelicals supported the executive order—evidence of a clear disconnect between the beliefs of many of our leaders and the congregations and communities they lead. That gap reveals the importance of viewing political participation as another area of the life of the whole person that must be nurtured and guided by the church. It shows that we may be woefully unaware of the formative power of political forces, and perhaps most importantly, it shows the weakness of our modern practices to counteract them.

Missing Furniture

When you enter a room in your home, a room that you've likely entered hundreds or thousands of times before, you rarely bump into the furniture. Your brain doesn't even need to take the time to consciously register the locations of the couch or coffee table. Your body knows how to take you through the room on a precognitive level.¹¹ For example, I recently removed a large bookshelf from the very front of my bedroom. Yet for weeks after I'd done that, I still instinctively entered the room from the far left of the door, farthest from a large obstacle that was no longer there.

It isn't just that our brain sees the furniture and makes a superfast decision to avoid it. We simply don't need to cognitively process the material things around us that we have learned to navigate with our bodies. I could physically feel the presence of a missing bookshelf, and it took weeks for my body to relearn the landscape of the room.

Likewise, we are formed in ways that help us navigate the world, before thinking even enters the picture. In every personality test I've ever taken, I've been labeled a thinker. It takes a lot more energy for me to process emotions than it does for me to evaluate arguments. But even those of us with this particular bent approach the world more emotionally than we think. Rosalind Picard, founder and director of the Affective Computing Lab at MIT, studied the way humans use emotion in processing and decision-making in an effort to see if this affective approach to the world could be used in computing. She explains that humans use emotion to deal with the complexity of life, instances where rational processing takes too much time. In other words, emotion is an "integral component of human decision making."¹²

Not Apolitical, Just Unexamined

We're unaware of the formative power of politics, but we're also unaware of the political force of our spiritual formation practices. Our church services, no matter how "low church" they may be, have

regular practices: the way we pray and sing together, the way we practice communion, the order of our services. Our classes and Bible studies also have practices: some of us eat together, others sit in rows of chairs. We segregate by age or gender or marital status. Our everyday lives certainly have practices: we habitually consume media, we regularly drive the same streets and neighborhoods, we water our plants and brush our teeth and unload the dishwasher. No matter how seemingly inconsequential, we have practices that slowly shape us in profound ways. These practices have the potential to counter the political and cultural forces vying for our loyalty, but they also have the potential to reinforce them.

Some definitions are helpful here. I use the phrase “spiritual formation” in much the same way that Smith uses the word *liturgies*. These are not limited to spiritual disciplines or corporate worship but encompass both—and more. We are spiritually formed (for good or ill) by any number of things, but particularly by those things that are repetitive, embodied, and impart a larger meaning. When we use the phrase “spiritual formation” in the church, we usually mean only the intentional practices we participate in with the expressed purpose of becoming more like Christ. But seeing our unintentional practices, too, as spiritually formative is important. I keep that word, *spiritual*, because nothing truly formative can impact us in ways that aren’t spiritual.

It’s about time we defined *political*. This word primarily indicates government functions—elections, legislation, court decisions, and so on. But delineating what pertains to the government and what doesn’t is a messy business. Our common life together will always involve the government in some way. When we wake up in the morning, our eyes open in neighborhoods that are determined by politics. The racial and ethnic makeup of our communities aren’t an accident; they are greatly influenced by government decisions about zoning laws and a long history of legal segregation. The schools we attend are also implicated—local and national policies affect the opportunities our neighbors have access to. The stores we shop at are governed by policies that protect or

neglect workers and businesses. The food we buy is influenced by policies that subsidize or regulate food industries. The cars we drive require gas, an industry with significant political implications for foreign policy and environmental law.

If we're truly concerned about our neighbors, then we'll inevitably come into contact with even more political questions. When we work at a local food pantry, we're working amidst a number of regulations that determine how nonprofits function. We're interacting with a problem (poverty) that has varied political causes and solutions. When we help local refugee children learn English, we're sitting across the table from children whose lives have been greatly dictated by politics—the conflicts that harmed them, the way the United States processes refugees, the number we accept, the benefits they can access. When our churches support a prison ministry, they are operating in the web of decades of criminal justice politics. Whether or not we even serve in any of these capacities is often determined not just by our own preferences but by the politics determining the proximity we have to any of these marginalized populations. Likewise, when the youth group has to bus kids to the “other side of the tracks” to find a nonprofit to serve alongside, that's politics.

Our lived theology has political consequences. Examining the political implications of our practices isn't about shifting the focus away from God. Our worship—corporately or individually—glorifies him above all else, and he has made it abundantly clear that the way we treat other people is a big part of how he views our worship. Isaiah is worth quoting in full on this subject.

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
“The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?” says the LORD.

“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.
Your hands are full of blood!
Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:10-17)

When our spiritual formation practices (the sacrifices and the festivals for Israel, and the spiritual disciplines, sacraments, and worship services for us) go unexamined, we end up participating in rituals that are “detestable” and a “burden” to God. Good practices lead us in the direction of seeking justice and defending the oppressed, goals with unavoidably political dimensions.

A Return to Analog

In the days and weeks after the 2016 election, nothing was more comforting than my language classes. Most of my classes felt worlds away from the reality of a church willingly used as a political pawn. But studying Greek—the hardest class I was taking—felt strangely comforting. There was a quiet joy running under my heartbreak about the state of the American church, precisely because I was starting to put that adjective before church.

The removal of that adjective reminded me that no matter the state of my faith in my country, a whole world lay outside of it. More than that, there was a long and complicated history beyond it too. The words I was studying—words that had been manipulated and abused by Christian leaders I had been taught to trust—were not theirs. They didn't own these words written miles and centuries away from the Starbucks I studied in, miles and centuries away from the board rooms and debate stages where they were wielded like weapons. These words were ancient, a reminder that my faith transcended my particular time and place.

Outside of political concerns, a lot of young people are starting to find comfort in ancient things, even if “ancient” only means thirty years old. In his book *The Revenge of Analog*, reporter David Sax explains how and why people are increasingly interested in “analog experiences” like writing with pen and paper, reading paper copies of books, listening to records, and using Polaroid-like cameras. In this context, “analog” is anything that isn't digital: it doesn't require a computer to work, and it operates in the physical world. “For increasing numbers of people around the world,” he writes, “in nearly every place where digital life has acquired a real and lasting presence, analog is now a conscious choice, requiring a greater cost, both materially and in terms of our time and mental capacity, than the digital default. And yet people increasingly elect it.”¹³ Sax's description of the pleasure many are finding in returning to analog should ring especially true for those of us with a biblical basis for the goodness and givenness of what our bodies experience: hearing “the luxurious sound of unfolding the Sunday

newspaper” or the joy “that comes from seeing your thoughts scratched onto a sheet of paper with the push of a pen.”¹⁴ We are hungry for physical experiences and embodied community.

Young Christians, often maligned for wanting flashy and new, sometimes get the blame for sleek church buildings, the influx of lasers and fog machines in worship services, and podcasts or livestreams replacing live church attendance. This criticism isn’t entirely unfounded, but it’s worth asking if maybe young Christians are being given what someone else *thinks* they want.

According to Pew Research, Millennials and Gen Xers are more curious about historic Christian practices than previous generations.¹⁵ While much has been made about the mass exodus of young Christians from the church, nearly as much has been made about their conversion to Anglicanism, Catholicism, or Eastern Orthodoxy. Anecdotal examples abound, with leaders noticing that among the young people staying in the church there is an increased desire for liturgical traditions.¹⁶ Anglican bishop Todd Hunter, who writes of his own journey to a liturgical expression of worship, notes that Christians are searching for historical connectedness, for theology and practices that are not “tied to the whims of contemporary culture but to apostolic-era understandings of Christian faith and practice.”¹⁷

In my own experience attending an evangelical university, I knew many students who moved to more liturgical churches as well as several churches that began adopting more liturgical practices, even in small doses. While the youth groups I grew up in seemed to operate largely on the principle that students thought church was stuffy and boring and needed to be amped up with more modern elements, the real surprise came in college, with so many of us finally getting what we had been implicitly told we wanted for so long—churches and campus worship services that served lattes and used fog machines—and yet we found ourselves *less* satisfied. It seemed that we (young Christians and everyone else) might not have known what we most desperately needed: a return to analog.

The only thing that can truly counter the strength of powerfully formative forces around us is rediscovering rather ancient ideas about spiritual formation. They're important in so many ways we'll discover, but this is a foundational one: they require our attention. Unlike many of our modern rituals, we call them what they are—rituals. Some of our discomfort with historic Christian traditions may lie in a fear of “ritual” as mindless, “vain repetitions” (Matthew 6:7 KJV). Yet we can be painfully unaware of how ritualistic our own services already are. Most of us follow the same order of service, sing many of the same songs, and pray with a “script” of language that we put in different orders for “spontaneous” prayer. We aren't participating in fewer rituals or liturgies, we're just less aware of them—and that can make them more dangerous.

Many church leaders know that their congregations are being strongly formed by political forces outside of their reach, but they don't know what to do. My hope is to offer a way forward—but not a new one. Maybe one of the best things for evangelicals desperate for an alternative to the political legacies of their elders is to hear this: the way forward requires looking back.

The Right Question

A friend of mine shared a link to an article about evangelicals' opposition to the United States accepting refugees with the comment, “Do they not know what their Bible says, or do they not care?” This kind of bewilderment characterizes many of our conversations about politics, leaving us to ask, Are we reading the same Bible?

I love my friend's question because it displays the exact misunderstanding I want to dive into. Why do we think/believe/support the things we do when we have every biblical basis not to? This is a question that will far outlast any political or cultural moment, and I think the answer is found in spiritual formation. We evaluate the effects of our spiritual formation on any number of things, but we primarily look at our personal piety and ask ourselves: Am I a better person? Do I feel closer to God? A better question is this: What am I being formed to love?

And the question I'm particularly interested in is this one: How does this practice form me in ways that have consequences for how I treat my neighbor, sometimes through my political participation?

This question will require that we evaluate the world around us, looking beyond the facts and figures we're asked to accept and instead looking at the "liturgies" we're unintentionally participating in, the spiritual formation practices we're uncritically allowing to shape us. We'll have to elevate the significance of things that seem small, zooming in with a microscope to see the ways they're forming us. This connection—between spiritual formation and political practice—is crucial for understanding how we are politically formed in spiritual directions and how we are spiritually formed in political directions. I don't think the question is whether we don't know what our Bible says or that we don't care. The real question is, What is forming us?

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