

DISCUSSION GUIDE TO
ANDY CROUCH'S

PLAYING GOD

FROM INTERVARSITY PRESS
FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS



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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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LEADING A BOOK DISCUSSION



Andy Crouch's *Playing God* is a thoughtful and provocative exploration of power, the dynamics of power and a biblical perspective on power. Power is something that touches all our lives. Discussing the book in a group can help clarify any questions readers have as well as sharpen what response is appropriate.

Leaders of a discussion on Andy Crouch's *Playing God* will want to be very familiar with the book beforehand. Read the book carefully and mark it up well. Note your own questions or responses.

Remember that this is a book about power. So you will want to be especially sensitive to your own power as a leader. You don't want to be overbearing, nor do you want to be passive. Your goal is to help the group flourish in its understanding and application of the book, not impress people with how much you know.

This discussion guide can be used in a small group, an adult education program or in the classroom. The questions assume that participants have read the book or the assigned section of the book before the meeting.

In addition to the following discussion questions, leaders may also ask questions like, "What parts of this chapter struck you the most? Did you underline or highlight anything that was particularly meaningful to you?"

Here are some guidelines to help you:

- At the beginning of your first time together, explain that these studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage the members of

the group to participate. However, do not put pressure on those who may be hesitant to speak.

- Begin each study on time.
- The study questions are designed to be read aloud just as they are written. You may, however, prefer to express them in your own words.
- Note also that there may be times when it is appropriate to deviate from the discussion guide. For example, a question may have already been answered. If so, move on to the next question. Or someone may raise an important question not covered in the guide. Take time to discuss it, but try to keep the group from going off on tangents.
- Avoid answering your own questions. An eager group quickly becomes passive and silent if members think the leader will do most of the talking. If necessary, repeat or rephrase the question until it is clearly understood, or refer to the commentary woven into the guide to clarify the context or meaning.
- Don't be afraid of silence in response to the discussion questions. People may need time to think about the question before formulating their answers.
- Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.
- Try to be affirming whenever possible. Especially affirm participation. Never reject an answer; if it seems clearly off-base, ask, "What led you to that conclusion?" or again, "What do the rest of you think?"
- Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you, even though this will probably happen at first. As group members become more at ease, they will begin to truly interact with each other. This is one sign of healthy discussion.
- Don't be afraid of controversy. It can be very stimulating. If you don't resolve an issue completely, don't be frustrated. Explain that the group will move on and God may enlighten all of you in later sessions.
- Periodically summarize what the group has said. This helps to draw to-

gether the various ideas mentioned and gives continuity to the study. But don't preach.

- End on time.

Many more suggestions and helps for discussion can be found in *How to Lead a LifeGuide Bible Study* and *The Big Book on Small Groups* (both from InterVarsity Press/USA).

A SINGLE-SESSION DISCUSSION GUIDE TO *PLAYING GOD*



The following questions are designed to help individuals and groups explore many of the provocative themes in *Playing God* by Andy Crouch in a single 60- to 90-minute session. (In the six-session guide that follows, each of the six sessions is designed to be 45 minutes long.)

1. The author says power is a gift (p. 9). Why do most people have a hard time thinking that power is good?
2. On page 17 Crouch offers “a deceptively simple definition: power is the ability to make something of the world. . . . Power is simply (and not so simply) the ability to participate in that stuff-making, sense-making process that is the most distinctive thing that human beings do.” Do you find this definition helpful or problematic? Explain.
3. How, according to the book, are power, image bearing and flourishing connected (pp. 34-36)?
4. How does the story in chapter two of learning the cello illustrate how power need not be a zero-sum game but can actually multiply as well as lead to flourishing?
5. Which vision of reality do you find more true to life—Nietzsche’s will to power or Crouch’s creating to flourish (p. 51)? Explain.
6. Which vision do you find more appealing? Why?

7. Often it is easy to identify an idol like an addiction to a drug or gambling where the image-bearing capacity to flourish is nearly extinguished. Yet other idols are more subtle. Taking care of your body (a good thing) can slowly spiral into an idol, as it did for Steve Jobs. The solution in that case would not be to stop taking care of the good gift of the body that God has given us. From what we have learned about image bearing, flourishing and power, what can help us discern when a good thing has become a destructive idol?
8. On the author's train trip with Jayakumar Christian, the director of World Vision India said, "The poor are poor because someone else is trying to play God in their lives." What is meant by this phrase (p. 68)?
9. In chapter four (p. 71), Crouch writes, "God hates injustice and idolatry *because they are the same thing*." Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.
10. Crouch says some pit evangelism and social justice against one another, setting the relief of "present suffering" in opposition to the relief of "eternal suffering." Yet he suggests that evangelism and social justice are actually both means to the same end: restoring the image bearers' capacity for relationship and worship on the one hand, and restoring the full image of God in those whose worth and value have been diminished by injustice on the other hand.
Which of these two frames of reference do you find more helpful in understanding evangelism and social justice: the suffering framework or the restoring full image-bearing capacity? Explain.
11. Looking at chapter six, "The Hiddenness of Power," why is power so often invisible to those who have it?
12. In opening chapter seven, Crouch says that C. Wright Mills is wrong to say that "the ultimate kind of power is violence" and instead that "violence is the ultimate *distortion* of power." Explain what Crouch means by this and why he says it.
13. In chapter eight Crouch says *privilege* is the ongoing benefit we receive from past successful acts of power, like being understood around the world because we happened to grow up speaking

English or never being randomly stopped by police because of the color of our skin. The benefits of privilege are pretty self-evident. What are the dangers?

14. We don't normally think of institutions as gifts. In fact they often have negative connotations. Why in chapter nine does Crouch say we can consider institutions in this positive light?
15. Zombie institutions are those that don't create power and flourishing but leech them from society. Crouch suggests in chapter ten that zombie churches exist to keep the lights on rather than to be the light in dark places; they turn inward rather than outward; they serve insiders and ignore outsiders. How would you evaluate your own church on the following scale? Explain your answer.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Corpse				Zombie					Life-Giving Body

16. The trustees of an institution are more than those formally on a board of trustees. They are those committed to the institution who, while recognizing that institutions are fallen and flawed, seek flourishing for all the image bearers the institution touches. How can you be a trustee for an institution you are part of?
17. In chapter twelve, the author suggests that the classic spiritual disciplines (such as solitude, silence and fasting) can help us discipline our use of power. How can such disciplines lead us away from power and toward humility?
18. In chapter thirteen we read about the Old Testament practice of gleaning, of leaving the edges of fields unharvested for those in need to gather for themselves. Instead of the powerful and privileged keeping everything that is "rightfully" theirs, others are allowed to flourish. What are some practical ways we could give others some opportunities or privileges that come our way so they can flourish?
19. Crouch notes, "Death puts an end to all power. . . . But the Christian testimony is that death has been defeated by death itself" when Christ emptied himself of his position and privilege and died on the cross.

How does knowing that as a result we are in the grasp of the life-giving power of God help us also hold loosely to position and privilege?

20. The last Exploration considers the parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15. How does the father use his power for ever-increasing abundance and power?
21. How would you like to play the kind of God described in the parable?

A SIX-SESSION DISCUSSION GUIDE TO *PLAYING GOD*



The following questions are designed to help individuals and groups explore many of the provocative themes in *Playing God* by Andy Crouch. Each of the six sessions is designed for a 45-minute time slot.

Session 1 (Introduction, Chapter 1, Exploration: Genesis 1–2)

1. The author says power is a gift (p. 9). Why do most people have a hard time thinking that power is good?
2. On page 17 Crouch offers “a deceptively simple definition: power is the ability to make something of the world. . . . Power is simply (and not so simply) the ability to participate in that stuff-making, sense-making process that is the most distinctive thing that human beings do.” How do you find this definition helpful?
3. In what ways do you find this definition to be lacking or problematic?
4. On pages 19-26, Crouch tells of the work of Jayakumar Christian, the director of the Indian affiliate of the international humanitarian organization World Vision in the Gudiyatham district where World Vision was working with many freed slaves. How were you affected by the story?
5. In his exploration of Genesis 1–2 (pp. 29-36), the author suggests that many Christians pay too little attention to the first two and last two chapters of the Bible. As a result they have a story that begins with the

fall of humanity in Genesis and ends with Satan being cast into hell in Revelation 20. Consequently, they miss a different story that begins with the original good creation and concludes with the glorious new creation.

How do these two stories differ, and what difference do they make?

6. How are power, image bearing and flourishing connected (pp. 34-36)?
7. As we look at Genesis 1 (especially 1:28), how do we see the Creator pass on his own power to those he creates?
8. What are the implications of this for us?

Session 2 (Chapters 2-3)

1. How does the story in chapter two of learning the cello illustrate how power need not be a zero-sum game but can actually multiply as well as lead to flourishing?
2. In what situations have you seen examples of power multiplying and creating an environment where others can flourish?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche with the world of movie westerns (pp. 46-48)?
4. Do you agree that the Occupy and Tea Party Movements (see pp. 48-50) both had a distinctive Nietzschean flavor to their activism, with goals of mastery and domination? Explain.
5. Which vision of reality do you find more true to life—Nietzsche's will to power or Crouch's creating to flourish (p. 51)? Explain.
6. Which vision do you find more appealing? Why?
7. In chapter three Crouch says idols (be they money, sex, power, drugs) offer good things but lead us to expect the ultimate good from them. How have you seen good things in your life or the lives of others destroy the capacity for flourishing rather than enhance it?
8. Steve Jobs was the iconic CEO of both Apple and Pixar, two of the most successful technology companies of our day (see pp. 59-64). Despite his sometimes capricious and unforgiving leadership style, he created multiple opportunities for many of his own employees to

flourish as well as the customers who used his products. But, says Crouch, he had an idol. What was the good thing the idol offered, yet how did it ultimately destroy Jobs?

9. Often it is easy to identify an idol like an addiction to a drug or gambling where the image-bearing capacity to flourish is nearly extinguished. Yet other idols are more subtle. Taking care of your body (a good thing) can slowly spiral into an idol, as it did for Steve Jobs. The solution in that case would not be to stop taking care of the good gift of the body that God has given us. From what we have learned about image bearing, flourishing and power, what can help us discern when a good thing has become a destructive idol?

Session 3 (Chapter 4, A Note, Chapter 5, Exploration: John 2)

1. On the author's train trip with Jayakumar Christian, the director of World Vision India said, "The poor are poor because someone else is trying to play God in their lives." What is meant by this phrase (p. 68)?
2. In chapter four (p. 71), Crouch writes, "God hates injustice and idolatry *because they are the same thing*." Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.
3. Crouch says some pit evangelism and social justice against one another, setting the relief of "present suffering" in opposition to the relief of "eternal suffering." Yet he suggests that evangelism and social justice are actually both means to the same end: restoring the image bearers' capacity for relationship and worship on the one hand, and restoring the full image of God in those whose worth and value have been diminished by injustice on the other hand. Which of these two frames of reference do you find more helpful in understanding evangelism and social justice: the suffering framework or the restoring full image-bearing capacity? Explain.
4. When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered with two—to love God and to love others. Why did he do so?
5. Are you more motivated to evangelize or to engage in social justice? Why?

6. The early Christian bishop Irenaeus wrote of living human beings as the glory of God, “the resurrected, ascended life of the truly Human One who has now poured out his Spirit on us and invites us into nothing less than God’s own glory,” as Crouch puts it (p. 92). Beyond washing away the effects of sin and rebellion against God, what might this entail for us?
7. In chapter five Crouch notes that in the New Testament the Greek word translated “image” in Colossians 1:15 is *eikōn* (icon). Crouch then lists those who in recent history are icons (image bearers) whom we might emulate or take inspiration from: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oskar Schindler, Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. Who are the icons (image bearers) who have affected you most and how?
8. In his exploration of the miracle at the wedding of Cana in John 2, Crouch notes that “Jesus’ power leads to overflow, abundance and excellence, that is, to flourishing” (p. 110). While saving a party from disaster may seem unimportant, how is it also encouraging to us that our power can be used for such purposes?
9. At the end of the Exploration, the author notes that in John’s Gospel, this story about the wedding and wine is the first *sign*, something that points beyond itself to a deeper meaning. What does the miracle point to?
10. What does this tell us about power?

Session 4 (Exploration: Exodus 20, Chapters 6-8, Exploration: John 13)

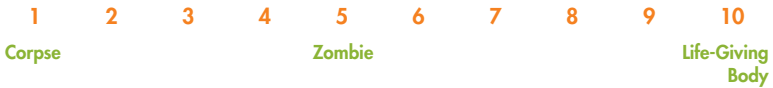
1. Crouch considers the Ten Commandments in his exploration of Exodus 20. How is keeping sabbath a basic spiritual discipline regarding power?
2. Have you found keeping sabbath to be helpful? Why or why not?
3. How is the commandment about honoring parents also related to issues of power?
4. Looking at chapter six, “The Hiddenness of Power,” why is power so often invisible to those who have it?

5. When have you been keenly aware of someone else's power because you had little?
6. In opening chapter seven, Crouch says that C. Wright Mills is wrong to say that "the ultimate kind of power is violence" and instead that "violence is the ultimate *distortion* of power." Explain what Crouch means by this and why he says it.
7. What difference does it make to us if we think power is ultimately rooted in violence or not?
8. In chapter eight Crouch says *privilege* is the ongoing benefit we receive from past successful acts of power, like being understood around the world because we happened to grow up speaking English or never being randomly stopped by police because of the color of our skin. The benefits of privilege are pretty self-evident. What are the dangers?
9. In his exploration of John 13, Crouch says that in washing the disciples' feet Jesus is giving up not power but privilege and status. Explain why you do or don't agree.
10. What are ways that we (individually, as a community or as a church) can exercise power and yet hold privilege or status at arm's length?

Session 5 (Chapters 9-11, Exploration: Philemon)

1. We don't normally think of institutions as gifts. In fact they often have negative connotations. Why does Crouch say we can in fact consider institutions in this positive light?
2. Consider the family as an institution rather than as a particular group of related people. How can the family as an institution make flourishing as image bearers possible?
3. A successful institution, as Crouch says in chapter nine, is one in which most of those involved flourish in their roles rather than just a few participants experiencing abundance and growth. What are examples of such successful institutions?
4. Crouch suggests that "if we are serious about flourishing, across space and through time, we will be serious about institutions." What institutions are you involved with and why?

5. Zombie institutions are those that don't create power and flourishing but leech them from society. Crouch suggests in chapter ten that zombie churches exist to keep the lights on rather than to be the light in dark places; they turn inward rather than outward; they serve insiders and ignore outsiders. How would you evaluate your own church on the following scale? Explain your answer.



6. In *Divided by Faith*, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith note that white evangelical Protestants think about solving social problems almost exclusively in terms of personal actions and morality. Black Protestants, on the other hand, know that institutional realities often perpetuate injustices. Where do you stand regarding how social issues should be solved, and why?
7. Crouch contends that the layered traditions of the Pharisees (the legalistic burdens they placed on themselves and others) were an institution. Indeed crucifixion itself was an institutional form of punishment. How does this affect your thinking about the need to deal with broken institutions?
8. Sometimes institutions are broken not just because some abuse their power but also because many don't use the power they have; they passively go along with or help cover the abuses of others. In chapter eleven Crouch calls them "underlords." What are the challenges of playing a positive role in such institutions?
9. The trustees of an institution are more than those formally on a board of trustees. They are those committed to the institution who, while recognizing that institutions are fallen and flawed, seek flourishing for all the image bearers the institution touches. How can you be a trustee for an institution you are part of?
10. In Paul's letter to Philemon (discussed in the exploration at the end of part three), Paul persuades, affirms, remembers, encourages and asks Philemon to get ready for a visit from him—no doubt to personally

discuss the situation of Onesimus. But he never orders Philemon to free the slave. Why?

11. Crouch mentions two well-established coercive institutions that nonetheless are nearly invisible—abortion and incarceration. Some call for immediate and pervasive reform of these institutions. Paul’s letter to Philemon seems to take an incremental approach. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach to institutional reform?

Session 6 (Chapters 12-14, Exploration: Luke 15)

1. In chapter twelve, the author suggests that the classic spiritual disciplines (such as solitude, silence and fasting) can help us discipline our use of power. How can such disciplines lead us away from power and toward humility?
2. What experiences have you had with these and other spiritual disciplines, and how did they affect you?
3. Crouch mentions how Jesus often allowed himself to be interrupted. How can nurturing an interruptible life also help us keep our power focused on flourishing image bearers?
4. In chapter thirteen we read about the Old Testament practice of gleaning, of leaving the edges of fields unharvested for those in need to gather for themselves. Instead of the powerful and privileged keeping everything that is “rightfully” theirs, others are allowed to flourish. What are some practical ways we could give others some opportunities or privileges that come our way so they can flourish?
5. Crouch writes, “There is no quicker way to discern our god playing or image bearing than to take the measure of our sabbath observance” (p. 253). What do you think your sabbath observance says about you?
6. The Old Testament also calls for not planting and cultivating every seventh year. What do you think of Crouch’s ideas about sabbatical years versus retirement?
7. Every fifty years, says Deuteronomy, God’s people were to cancel debts and release those who had fallen into slavery. This was called the

year of Jubilee. Do you agree that bankruptcy laws express some of these same values today? Why or why not?

8. In chapter fourteen the author discusses three significant roles of the church as a community of power: the proclaimer of the true story of power, the reminder of the end of power in death and the celebrator of a greater power in worship. Which of these do you find helpful in coming to terms with issues of power?
9. Crouch notes, "Death puts an end to all power. . . . But the Christian testimony is that death has been defeated by death itself" when Christ emptied himself of his position and privilege and died on the cross. How does knowing that as a result we are in the grasp of the life-giving power of God help us also hold loosely to position and privilege?
10. The last Exploration considers the parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15. How does the father use his power for ever-increasing abundance and power?
11. How would you like to play the kind of God described in the parable?