

The Liturgy of Politics **Discussion Guide**

The Liturgy of Politics argues that we don't pay enough attention to the stories shaping our lives. We miss the animating forces humming underneath our everyday actions and conversations. We discount the power of communal stories and ignore the ways they exert influence over us. And, most importantly, we fail to recognize the political power of our corporate and personal spiritual practices.

We need each other's presence and perspective to show us the things we're missing. We need diverse communities to help us identify our biases, discover the desires and fears we may be ignoring, and direct us towards the truth.

This discussion guide will work best in that kind of setting: a diverse community of Christians who have opportunities to work together to create flourishing in their local contexts. Though these questions and resulting action steps can certainly be taken by individuals as well, they are designed for at least two people to take together. Church members, school communities, and neighborhoods may especially find this guide helpful.

The Liturgy of Politics sets out to pose a question more than provide an answer. Yes, it argues that our spiritual practices—our corporate worship, the sacraments of the church, the spiritual disciplines—form us in ways that change our inevitably political life in the world. But how these ideas will change a particular space—a church in a particular tradition, a neighborhood in a particular place, a school with its own particular culture—remains a question.

Each chapter features a series of discussion questions designed to help your community turn *The Liturgy of Politics'* questions into answers.

After the questions, there are suggested action steps. These vary from suggestions for evaluating corporate or individual practices to political advocacy opportunities. The questions and the action steps will say “you” a lot—this means both you as an individual and “y’all,” you as a collective. You might want to discuss the questions in a group and then apply the action steps individually, or you may want to work on the actions together.

N.T. Wright called the beauty of creation “a set of hints, of conspiratorial whispers, of clues and suggestions and flickers of light, all nudging us into believing that behind the beautiful world is not random chance but the loving God.”¹ I hope that the description of the spiritual and political life of the church found in *The Liturgy of Politics* will function similarly, as a conspiratorial whisper that beckons particular communities with all of their specific needs, opportunities, quirks, and traditions, to seek the holistic flourishing of the world.

CHAPTER ONE: APOLITICAL OR UNEXAMINED: WHAT SPIRITUAL FORMATION HAS TO DO WITH POLITICS

1. What do you think when you hear the words “political” and “spiritual”? What images or feelings come to mind with each of these words? What do you see as the relationship between the “political” and the “spiritual”?
2. What is your political background? What ideas or figures have informed your perspective throughout your life (likely beginning in childhood)?
3. What do you think about when you hear the word “liturgy”? What is your church background in relationship to formal liturgy?
4. When you think about your beliefs—both political and theological—do you tend to think of them in terms of what you *think* or what you *feel*? What role do you think *affect* (emotion or desire, the “gut feeling” that drives our behavior) has in shaping your beliefs?

ACTIONS

Meditate on these passages that illustrate the connection between worship and politics:

- Isaiah 1:11-17
- Isaiah 58
- Micah 6
- Amos 5
- Jeremiah 29:4-14
- Acts 2
- Romans 12
- Revelation 21:1-22:5

There will be action suggestions in future chapters that talk about your “neighbors.” Who are yours? Make a list. Just as Jesus’ response to a similar question in Luke 10 indicates, your answer needs to include (even prioritize!) the most vulnerable among you. Here’s a place to start:

- Who lives near you?
- Who do you interact with regularly?
- Who do you avoid?
- Who lives in your church’s neighborhood?
- What community institutions are near you: schools, community centers, parks, etc.?

CHAPTER TWO: THE LITURGY OF POLITICS—LOVES AND LOYALTIES

1. What political “rituals” do you participate in? Remember that we’re using that word “political” pretty broadly, to mean anything dealing with our common life together. Think about the media you consume (not just news, but movies & TV shows, podcasts,

books, etc.), your voting habits, any rallies or protests you attend, community service or advocacy, policy-making at smaller levels like schools or churches, and any public services you use.

2. Where is your political love directed? In other words, what kind of world do you ache for?
3. What loyalties do you have? (This isn't a trick question, loyalties are good and inevitable!) Which ones are stronger or weaker?
4. Do any of the fears described in this chapter resonate with you? What fears tend to motivate your actions?
5. Before we dive into some of the common political false gospels, where do you see idolatry in your life now? What about in the life of your community?

ACTIONS

- **Choose one source of media that you regularly consume and spend some time evaluating what it does to you *affectively*. Ask *yourself*:** What am I being asked to desire? Fear? Be loyal to?
- **One way to retrain our loyalties is to work on behalf of those unlike us.** Find out if there are refugee or immigrant services in your community that you can support financially or with your time. Think about the places where you live, shop, work, and worship—are they segregated by race or economic status? Consider how you can move the regular processes of your life into more diverse and underserved areas, not as a savior or a leader but initially as a guest and eventually as a friend.
- **Advocate against fearmongering and fear-based policies.** When you hear fearmongering from a community leader, media source, or friend, call it out. When you hear Islamophobia, xenophobia, racist generalizations about crime, or anything that uses fear to rationalize injustice, say something. Think about what kinds of policies in your own context are fear-based—immigration or refugee

policies, security policies, criminal justice policies—and educate yourself about compassionate and just alternatives to advocate for.

CHAPTER THREE: OF THIS WORLD: THE GOSPELS OF PROSPERITY, PATRIOTISM, SECURITY, AND SUPREMACY

1. Which of these four gospels exerted the most influence in your life? In the life of your community?
2. What comes to mind when you think about wealth and poverty? Don't *just* think about definitions, think about the images, feelings, and stories that come to your mind. Consider closing your eyes and simply describing what you see as you ponder the words “wealth” and “poverty.”
3. What kind of relationship do you think Christians should have to their country? How do we balance our special concern for the place we live (or the place we're from) with our ultimate loyalty to the historic and global church?
4. What makes you feel safe? What does your community feel is necessary to maintain safety?
5. What messages about race did you receive growing up? How have the communities and institutions you have been in shaped your own racial identity?

ACTIONS

- **Evaluate your budget.** Whether your personal/family budget or the budget of your church, business, or your local or national government, a budget reveals loves. What a person or community desires, fears, and values will be evidenced by how they allocate funds. This is a personal question, but it's also a political question: know how your local and national government spends money and advocate for better budgets.

- **Learn your own history.** Each of these false gospels operate communally, and you will be better equipped to identify them when you know your own history. Learn about your nation’s history with race, money, and security; but also focus on the history of your local area. Start here: learn the racial history of your local community, school, church, etc. This will require effort; it’s worth it!

CHAPTER FOUR: FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD: SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND PUBLIC LIFE

1. What first came to your mind when you read the question at the start of the chapter: What is your salvation *for*?
2. How does the work you do now—whether you are paid for it or not—reflect the creative order?
3. What responsibility do Christians have to create positive change in the world?
4. What does it mean to “share the gospel”? How do evangelism and service relate to each other?

ACTIONS

- **Form voting habits.** What responsibilities do earthly governments have? Spend some time in Scripture in order to develop a theology of the role and responsibilities of government. Talk to your pastor(s) and leaders, read from trusted sources, and pray. We tend to think only in terms of specific issues, so that we come to an issue with a predetermined position but not a broader approach to thinking about politics. Do your best to formulate a holistic approach to voting that applies to all issues affecting your neighbors.
- **Pick something.** You cannot possibly be educated, emotionally invested in, and spend time advocating for everything. While we should strive to be responsibly knowledgeable about a range of issues that affect our neighbors, we should also consider choosing

one (or a few) issues to become especially informed about. Spend some time researching and praying before choosing one (you're also not stuck with it forever). One of the benefits of our communities is that we each bring a different gift, including the gift of our passion about something not everyone will be as passionate about.

CHAPTER FIVE: A STORY TO LIVE INTO: SCRIPTURE AND POLITICAL FORMATION

1. What is your relationship with Scripture: how were you taught to think about it, and how do you think about it now? What is Scripture's role in your life and the life of your church, and how do you typically apply it to your life?
2. What things do you tend to notice in Scripture? We need our communities to help us see what we miss, so what do you bring to your community as a gift—a certain lens you see through, a perspective you have, a soapbox you won't get off?
3. How can you practice lament?
4. What does it look like to “receive” Scripture rather than “using” it?
5. Who most informs your understanding of Scripture (your pastor, a certain scholar or teacher, a commentary or study Bible you reference)? How can you diversify your educators?

ACTIONS

- **Public reading.** Find creative ways to read Scripture in the way it has most often been read throughout history: out loud. This may be a regular part of your tradition's worship, but if it is not, think about how to incorporate it in meaningful ways however you can. Read longer sections of Scripture in Bible study or with friends/family, read in the service, read it for children. This is also a good opportunity to build up new leaders and hear from other voices.

- **Buy (or check out from the library) a book or commentary from another perspective.** Studying a book of the Bible or a certain theological doctrine? It is easy to find resources from marginalized perspectives with a quick Google search! There are also lists of such resources on these websites: The Witness (thewitnessbcc.com), CBE International (cbeinternational.org); Deidra Riggs' website (<http://www.deidrarriggs.com/2017/07/03/books-christian-authors-color/>).

CHAPTER SIX: EKKLESIA: THE CHURCH AS A TRAINING GROUND FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

1. How do you typically define the church? Consider both what the church is and what it is not. How is the church different from a group of Christians, a Bible study, or a parachurch organization?
2. What are some specific examples of the church as a moral training ground? What kinds of opportunities do you have to rehearse moral skills, tell animating stories, and have failures met with grace?
3. How can your practice of baptism in your church's particular context better reflect the political nature of baptism?
4. How can your practice of communion in your church's particular context better reflect the political nature of communion?

ACTIONS

- **Advocate for Christians who are otherwise different from you.** Think about how you can foster a greater sense of loyalty and love to the family of God by significantly advocating on behalf of Christians who are not like you: Christians of another race or ethnicity, Christians who live in another country, Christians of a different socioeconomic status. We are called to advocate for the marginalized regardless of whether they are believers or not, but specific actions can help foster our loyalty in a special way.

- **Treat them like family.** Think of one specific way you can treat the other people in your local church as your actual family: sitting with them at church, inviting them over for dinner, supporting their needs. Think especially of the marginalized, including a group you may not immediately think of: singles. If you are married, how can you show to single people that you belong to the same family? The small things listed earlier are great, but think even bigger as you go: invite them on vacation with you, have them spend time with your kids if you have them, live with them!

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RHYTHM OF OUR LIVES: TIME, MUSIC, CONFESSION

1. What events and changes mark time in your life and the life of your community? What does your telling of time reveal about what you value?
2. What is your relationship to the liturgical calendar? How has your understanding of it changed through the description in this chapter?
3. How are rhythms currently incorporated in your current church service? What parts of your corporate worship time or your personal spiritual practices are repetitive, bodily, and time-bound?
4. Think about the songs you regularly sing at church—what themes can you identify among them? What do they teach you about God, yourself, and your communal responsibility? Consider looking up the lyrics to one or two go-to songs and making a list of the concepts and lessons within it.
5. What practices in your community might be warped or distorted right now, like the example in the chapter of lighting and space making services more individualized?

ACTIONS

- **Consider each season's opportunities.** Think through how each season in the liturgical calendar offers opportunities for community-oriented service or political participation. For example, during Advent, how can you observe the season of longing and lament by advocating on behalf of others? During Pentecost, how can you identify with Christians across social barriers? List out each church calendar season (see below) and write down one or two ways to observe the season for the good of others.
- **Church calendar seasons:** Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time.
- **Use your space to serve others.** Think about how you can use your space (both your church space and your personal/family space) to serve others. What community groups could your church allow to use the building? Who needs a meal at your table or a stay in your guest room?

CHAPTER EIGHT: BENT ON THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD: SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AND POLITICAL FORMATION

1. What spiritual disciplines have you personally or communally practiced? Which are most foreign to you?
2. How can spiritual disciplines be corrupted or warped in your context, like the examples Lauren Winner gives of the prayers of slave-owning women in *The Dangers of Christian Practice*?
3. Read through the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6: 9–13, Luke 11: 2–4). Which line stands out to you as a request, truth, or posture that you need to focus on in your life? How might you do so this week?
4. Which description of a spiritual practice in this chapter most

surprised you? Are there any you are rethinking now based on what you read?

ACTIONS

- **Implement a spiritual discipline.** Spend one week focusing on the internal dimensions and one week focusing on the external dimensions.
- **Practice fasting.** Give up something for the sake of others. This could be food, but it does not need to be (and should not be if you have a history of disordered eating). Think of something that you could sacrifice (your money, time, possessions) in accordance with your desires to be dependent upon God and to provide for others.
- **Practice hospitality.** Invite others into your space and feed them! There's a reason Scripture spends so much time talking about hospitality and eating together. It's not just because shared meals held cultural significance at the time, they still do!

CHAPTER NINE: A CONFESSING CITY: READING POLITICS WITH AUGUSTINE

1. What kind of “political education” have you had? What sources of information about political processes and Christian political obligations have influenced you?
2. How do you define “success” and “failure” in politics? How might those definitions need to change?
3. How can we balance our pessimism about the world (that it is fallen and unredeemable by human effort) and our optimism (that it was created good and will one day be restored)?
4. When have you seen people proclaim that this election/policy/moment was the “most important in our lifetime”? How do you think we can defeat that mentality?

5. What can your community confess together? What sins have you historically committed or excused? What disordered loves have you harbored? What stories need re-narrating in your community?

ACTIONS

- **Confess together.** Find a creative way to confess corporately with your family or friends, community, or church. There are certain times of the year that make the most sense to lament certain evils and confess your corporate complicity in them, but anytime is good.
- **Do some homework.** What political education opportunities exist in your local area that you can learn from? Is there an AND Campaign chapter? A local community center that offers classes? A book club or class at your church (or one you could start as a fellow learner)?

CHAPTER TEN: CREATION REDEEMED: ESCHATOLOGY AND POLITICAL FORMATION AND EPILOGUE: SHALOM

1. What images, ideas, and emotions come to your mind when you think about the “end times”? (Note: not just theological positions!)
2. How does your tradition or church tend to think about eschatology—not just their theological positions, but their entire approach to talking about eschatology and how it informs life on earth now, etc.?
3. When you read Revelation, what parts seem most applicable to your life now? What parts describe conditions you find relatable?
4. Just as Jeremiah proclaimed a seemingly pessimistic message that nevertheless promised future redemption, what do you think is being destroyed right now, and what is being built?

ACTIONS

- **Read Revelation.** But don't do it alone! Read through the book with some friends, including the friends of commentaries and other books. If you're uncertain about how to start, try *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by Michael J. Gorman or *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham. Both are short and accessible.
- **Do something for the sake of doing it.** What work can you do this week that is just *good*? What work can you do that reflects our creation mandate to steward creation and anticipates our redeemed creation mandate to steward the new heavens and earth? It might be baking something delicious, reading a good work of literature, teaching a child how to create something beautiful, mending a relationship, rectifying even a minor injustice, or dancing to good music. Revel in doing the kind of work you were meant to do and will continue to do, appropriately perfected and redeemed, in eternity.

Endnotes

- ¹ N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 9.