

Practices for the Election Season

Every presidential election year, the warning comes earlier and earlier: election season is coming! Between social media posts and conversations with friends and at work, many bemoan the corrupting influences of election season. Everything is politicized, relationships are strained by political differences, the news abounds with minute-by-minute polling and candidate coverage. It's true: this is an exhausting and challenging season, especially for Christians considering our own history of political idolatry. As the weight of responsibility grows heavy upon us, we may find ourselves tempted to seek an escape. But loving our neighbor and fulfilling our commission to seek the flourishing of our communities requires political engagement — though perhaps not in the ways we tend to imagine.

Perhaps the catchphrase itself, “the election season,” provides some insight into a way forward. The election season operates like all other seasons: it is a period of time made significant by our actions, emotions, and ideas. We are inundated with reminders of the time we're in: campaign ads, lawn signs, debates on social media and in real life. Humans have historically marked time in powerful ways—the rhythms of ancient festivals and holidays instilled values, motivated action, and rehearsed a communal story. Our election season can operate similarly, teaching us a story and set of values that hum underneath the surface of our everyday actions.

The people of God throughout history have resisted the rhythms and rituals of foreign nations or idolatrous religions by doing more than merely recalling their own beliefs or reciting the truth. God's people

have also participated in alternate rhythms and rituals that *counter-*formed them. When surrounded by idol-worshipping nations, God gave Israel rituals and festivals that they might rehearse the story of God’s goodness and faithfulness. Similarly, the rhythms of meeting and eating together formed the early church in a culture divided by ethnicity and social status.

As the people of God in our own time and place, we face a similar susceptibility to the strength of the political rituals and rhythms around us, and we have similar tools at our disposal to combat them. This short guide provides one way to incorporate historic practices of the church into our lives in order to resist those worldly rituals and rhythms. First, we’ll discuss practices to incorporate during this season, as well as some classic Christian spiritual disciplines that may be especially fruitful, helpful, or comforting during this season. The list is certainly not exhaustive, and I encourage you to look deeper into spiritual disciplines if you find practicing the few mentioned here to be meaningful.

Then, I share two written prayers that speak to the specific difficulties and opportunities of this election season. The first is intended to be prayed in a group but can also be prayed alone on behalf of the greater community of God.

New Rhythms: Practices to Prepare for the Election Season

INFORMATION INTAKE PRACTICES

As we approach the election season, take some time to evaluate the way you receive and process political news and information. This is a good exercise to do in community—with your family, friends, roommates, small group members, or ministry partners. It will also require some extended time spent in prayer, reflection, and journaling. This kind of process might be the norm for other issues we think of as more “spiritual,” but it is also a good idea in the equally spiritual realm of politics. We are bombarded with information constantly—information that never

merely inputs new data into our brains. It is always communicated, in varying degrees, via stories, images, and emotions. We don't often realize it, but we are playing in dangerous spiritual territory! And yet our involvement in the world—including in politics—is an important way we love our neighbor and seek flourishing in our communities. With that in mind, spend some time personally and then communally (if you can) evaluating your information intake habits.

Pray. Ask God to reveal habits you may not recognize or the potential harm of habits you assume are harmless.

Create a simple outline of your day, with an emphasis on where you receive information about politics or current events. This includes media consumption of all kinds (news, TV shows, movies, books, podcasts, etc.) as well as social media, conversations with friends/family or coworkers, education from schools or civic institutions, and even sermons or Bible studies.

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What trends in my intake habits do I notice?
2. Is there a *medium* (books, online articles, news on TV, talk radio, etc.) that I rely more heavily on than others? What are the characteristics of that medium, and how might they affect me?
3. What *sources* do I rely on? Do they mostly lean one way or are they more diverse? (Hint: this one might require opening yourself up to the observations of your community and letting them help you answer according to the patterns they see in your life.)
4. Think about your most important source of information or education. Ask yourself: What does [source] make me love? What does it make me fear? Who does it help me see as my neighbor, and who does it tempt me to view with suspicion or fear? What does it make me want most in this world and for this world?

Create a short list of criteria for the information you consume. The goal is not to be overly complicated or dogmatic, but to have an easy

checklist so that when you find yourself falling down a rabbit hole of articles, scrolling through Facebook posts, or keeping a news station on in the background at all times, you can remember the standards you've set for yourself. Here's an example:

1. Quality: Is this a trustworthy source of information?
2. Quantity: Have I already consumed enough, or too much, news today?
3. Bias: Have I already consumed enough, or too much, information from a certain "side" or perspective?
4. Heart: What am I feeling? Am I trying to feed a feeling or suppress a feeling with the information I'm consuming? What do I want this information to do for me?

"Best Practices" for Social Media

Similarly, now is a good time to come up with your own set of "best practices" for social media. Again, the goal here is not to come up with rigid and complicated rules, but to take the habit of social media consumption as seriously as it should be taken. For something so immensely formative, we can treat it incredibly cavalierly.

The election season is a great time to take stock of your social media habits and come up with your own best practices. You can use questions, like the example of media consumption questions above, or you can set more general practices. After writing my own, I printed them out and put them near my desk, as a reminder to keep these guidelines in mind.

Like all habits, this will take practice! You might start out with more dogmatic rules that become natural habits over time. You might also want to start out with a harder line (like setting time limits on your phone or deleting social media apps entirely and only accessing your feeds on your computer) before adding back more interaction with your best practices in place.

Your best practices might be different from mine, but here's an example to get you started.

1. Take a break. Schedule regular breaks from all social media. It could be a day of the week, a period of time every day, or a longer break when necessary.
2. Check your heart. Why am I here? Is there a feeling I'm trying to avoid? A need I'm trying to have met? Brokenness in my real life I'm trying to mend somewhere else?
3. Choose your influences wisely. You don't need to follow everyone (even everyone you know in real life), and you don't need to keep up with every issue or popular figure. Choose carefully who you will follow and what issues you will engage. (For me, there were politicians, pastors, and theologians that I followed just to "keep up with them," even though I knew it was unhealthy. Just stop.)
4. Know your audience. If you are engaging in social media, it should be for the sake of others (like all things). Know who you are trying to encourage, exhort, or build relationships with. Don't aim for universal approval, and don't try to meet the needs of people that you don't know well enough. You will not be the answer to everyone's questions, and you shouldn't try to be.
5. Pray and seek accountability. Pray before you post anything that you feel unsettled or unsure about. Have a close friend (or a few) that you trust to ask about the appropriateness of a post, and expect to be challenged and critiqued in love.

"Best Practices" for Real Life Conversations

I promise we aren't just making lists of rules here! In-person conversations about political issues are crucial for forging our common life together, and they are just as tricky as online conversations. You can gauge facial expressions and body language in a way you cannot online, but you also don't have time to carefully (and calmly!) compose your response or pause to do extra research. Face-to-face conversations can be draining and difficult, but they are easier to navigate when you've given them the prior attention they deserve.

Make a list of “best practices” like the one above for online engagement. Examples include:

1. Ask questions when you don’t understand or are tempted to characterize the other person’s position in the harshest terms. Ask questions even when you do understand but hope they didn’t mean what they said. Sometimes, giving someone a chance to restate their position helps them hear their own biases or false equivalencies.
2. Include an affirmation or kind word in every conversation.
3. When you aren’t sure how to respond, pause long enough to actually think through what you want to say. If you want to wait until a future time to give a full response, that’s okay to say.

Ask trusted friends or family (trusted does not mean cheerleaders or yes men) **what your tendencies are when conversations get heated.** Even just having this knowledge can help you avoid any defaults or habits you want to avoid.

Practice. Conversation is a valuable and important skill, so it will require practice. Try to find lower risk opportunities to practice listening, asking good questions, and making arguments that are persuasive to your conversation partner. Practice in more comfortable settings, such as striking up a conversation about a difficult or controversial subject with someone you trust, when you’re both relaxed and in the mood to talk. These kinds of lower-risk settings should also give you an opportunity to practice changing your mind when you’re given new information or confronted with a persuasive argument. It’s important to note, however, that conversation is not the same thing as debate. Debating is also a valuable and important skill, but it’s not the one we’re practicing here.

Old Rhythms: Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines help us open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit. C. S. Lewis said that when we practice “religious duties” we are “like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at

last the water comes, it may find them ready.”¹ The same is true of the spiritual disciplines: they are not formulas with guaranteed results, but, rather, a set of practices and postures that Christians throughout history have found useful.

Spiritual disciplines are also not merely internal. They are certainly intended to change our hearts, but they are also intended to change our entire lives. In his book, *Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World*, philosopher Kyle David Bennett explains that while we tend to focus on the way the disciplines impact our “vertical” relationships, they are equally intended to impact our “horizontal” relationships to our neighbors. He points out that the prophets consistently opposed the practices of the people of God that allowed them to seek inner experiences with God while continuing to oppress those around them. We can be guilty of the same. “We fasted and drew near to God, but oppressed those around, beside, and below us. We humbled ourselves but bickered and fought with strangers. We abstained from food, but we didn’t share it with the poor or those in need. We resisted consumerism but walked past the homeless man with holes in his coat. We sought God but forsook our neighbor.”²

The Liturgy of Politics aims to remind us that our corporate worship, spiritual disciplines, Scripture reading habits, and every other “spiritual” practice intends to shape us in external ways—including in the way we seek our common life together through politics. The following is by no means an exhaustive list of spiritual disciplines, nor is it an exhaustive list of the spiritual disciplines that will best prepare you for an election season. Consider the disciplines below as suggestions that might be especially fruitful during this season, as well as examples of ways to reorient your thinking about the disciplines, so that whatever your spiritual practices, they can form you to serve your neighbor.

SIMPLICITY

The spiritual discipline of simplicity usually means owning less and/or doing less. It means seeking a simpler life both internally and externally:

Richard Foster says that it begins in “inward focus and unity,” and results in outward liberation.³ We pare down our lives to the essentials, not out of pragmatism or selfishness, but in order to focus on what is important and what we really need. What distinguishes the Christian practice of simplicity from a minimalist lifestyle or the Marie Kondo decluttering trend is that simplicity calls us to own less *so that* we can give more. Our inner and outer simplicity is oriented not toward our own peace of mind but towards an open-handed approach to the world. When we are freed from the very real constraints that our wealth and possessions put upon us, we become the kind of people who give freely of ourselves.

Practically, this means that an election season is a great time to get rid of stuff. This isn't spring cleaning, though. Your local Salvation Army might be a great place to donate used clothes or items you no longer need, but the practice of simplicity offers us an opportunity to think about how to use our stuff in more personal ways. Does someone in your church or neighborhood need clothes, furniture, or cookware? Is there an organization your church partners with that needs supplies (perhaps even one that you could personally become involved with after your donation)? Beyond that: what money can you give away?

Simplicity also means giving away immaterial things, like your time, influence, connections, or attention. Think about what opportunities you have in your own context to give away these things freely. The real heart of simplicity is that what we have is not our own (Lev 25:23). That is a vitally important lesson for an election season, a time in which we try to make collective decisions about how to share creation with one another. Simplicity helps us unclench our fists from around God's good gifts and find creative ways to share them more equitably.

MEDITATION

Some Christians get a little uncomfortable around the idea of meditation. It feels foreign to their faith and recalls connotations of New Age mysticism or pagan practices. However, meditation is a historically Christian

spiritual practice. Scripture uses the language or concept of meditation frequently: meditating on the law (Psalm 1:2; 63:6; 119:97), seeking the guidance or voice of God (1 Kings 19:9-19; Jer 20:9), even Jesus spending time alone with the Father (Matt 14:13). Richard Foster writes that meditation is, “very simply, the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness.”⁴ The practice of meditation is not necessarily a set formula, but it does involve reading Scripture, spending time with it, and allowing the Holy Spirit to convict, comfort, or motivate us toward change.

Meditation is an especially fruitful practice for this season for a few reasons. In the midst of information overload, meditation keeps our focus sustained upon Scripture and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Our sinful nature often takes the words of Scripture and twists them to support whatever position we already held or justify some sin we want to continue. Meditation can slow our thinking and processing and help us assume a receptive posture toward Scripture, in which we allow the Holy Spirit to convict and question us.

Meditation also reforms our natural patterns of thinking. Dr. Bennett notes that most of our thoughts are oriented towards ourselves. We are selfish not only in our actions but in our thought patterns.⁵ This is especially true in an election season when our fears, desires, needs, and preferences are at the forefront of our minds. As we are bombarded with messages of what we will lose if one side wins and what good we might gain if the other does, meditation can help shape our thinking by pulling us away from ourselves in order to reflect on the needs of others.

FASTING

Fasting and feasting are two more disciplines we are prone to misunderstand.

Fasting might be the discipline most familiar to many of us, even Christians who grew up in less liturgical traditions. We abstain from

food (or something else) in order to strip away comforts, focus on God, and maybe even (if we've *really* misunderstood this practice) to punish ourselves for our sins. But fasting is so much more (and less) than this. We don't fast to punish ourselves and we don't fast to put a spiritual label on a weight-loss fad. We primarily fast to reorient our relationship to something of deep cultural and theological significance, something meaningful throughout the history of the people of God, and something fraught with political and social questions: food.

Fasting has always been a means through which the people of God have been formed into a community of justice. And justice has very often been connected with our habits of consumption. One of the most important biblical passages connecting justice and worship, Isaiah 58:3-7, describes the people of God complaining that God has not noticed or rewarded their dutiful fasting. Read it below (emphasis mine):

They lament, 'Why don't you notice when we fast?

Why don't you pay attention when we humble ourselves?'

Look, at the same time you fast, you satisfy your selfish desires,

you oppress your workers.

Look, your fasting is accompanied by arguments, brawls, and fistfights.

Do not fast as you do today,
trying to make your voice heard in heaven.

Is this really the kind of fasting I want?

Do I want a day when people merely humble themselves,
bowing their heads like a reed
and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes?

Is this really what you call a fast,
a day that is pleasing to the LORD?

No, this is the kind of fast I want.

**I want you to remove the sinful chains,
to tear away the ropes of the burdensome yoke,**

**to set free the oppressed,
and to break every burdensome yoke.
I want you to share your food with the hungry
and to provide shelter for homeless, oppressed people.
When you see someone naked, clothe him!
Don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood! (NET)**

God responds through Isaiah that they have misunderstood the very nature of fasting, by abstaining from food while exploiting their workers and quarreling with each other. Their fasting was supposed to inspire them to loose the chains of injustice, set the oppressed free, share their food with the hungry, and provide shelter for the foreigner.

This was not just a practice for ancient Israel, either. The early church fasted not merely for inner spiritual benefit, but to reserve food for those in greatest need of it. The Greek philosopher Aristides wrote an apologetic of the Christian faith that included this description of their life together: “if anyone among them comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast for two or three days for him. In this way they can supply any poor man with the food he needs.”⁶

Fasting can operate the same way for us today. When we fast from food or other material things in order to give them away, we more powerfully form our relationship to food. We learn that our normal habits of food acquisition, preparation, and consumption are usually selfish and thoughtless. We realize that we don't know where our food came from or who worked (or was exploited) for it, and that we don't think very much about what we waste or throw away. Fasting is an opportunity to rethink not only our relationship to food, but our relationship to all material goods. What are we using for our own gain that is intended to be shared for the benefit of others? What are we consuming that ought to be created?

Note: Fasting is a prevalent practice among different faiths and ideologies in part because humans have an intimate and powerful relationship to food. So, of course our relationship with food would be twisted and perverted by the forces of evil in our world. Even this attempt

to heal our relationship, fasting, can be twisted and perverted. Those with a history of disordered eating or other mental illness should not immediately assume that fasting is wise for them. The counsel and support of medical doctors, mental health professionals, spiritual leaders, friends, and family members may help some who struggle with a complicated relationship to food, body image, or deprivation to determine what fasting should look like in their life.

FEASTING

Most of us are more familiar with fasting than we are with feasting, and it's no wonder: some of us aren't very good at celebrating! We may only want to feast during an election season if the outcome goes our way, but what might it look like to feast during the process? As candidates and pundits slice up the world into smaller and smaller pieces of the pie and online debates pit the needs of some against the needs of others, feasting resists the logic of scarcity.

Through feasting, we give freely of ourselves to others, in a medium we have already identified as culturally and theologically significant: food. We "rest" not by ceasing our work but by working for enjoyment. We cook food that takes more time than it seems it should be worth, we bake with real butter and sugar, we use fancy dishes that normally stay tucked away for good company. And if the cake turns out wonky or someone breaks an expensive dish, it's okay. We aren't hoarding what we have, counting our porcelain plates, or judging the "success" or "failure" of an "event." We are celebrating!

Like all the other disciplines, feasting is not merely an opportunity for inward renovation. If we reduce the purpose of feasting to the joy or strength of our own like-minded community, we haven't fully experienced the discipline. In fact, if we're being honest, we'll likely discover that much of our "feasting" looks like the party Jesus warned against in Luke 14:12-14.

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you host a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends or your brothers or your

relatives or rich neighbors so you can be invited by them in return and get repaid. But when you host an elaborate meal, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (NET)

Our feasts are most formative when they include those with the least to offer us in return. We can throw a beautiful dinner party, but if the expectation is that the people you invite will invite you back next week, it’s not really a gift. So it’s not really a feast.

Throw some dinner parties this election season! Beforehand, ask yourself: who is missing from my table? Who do I look over because my social status or wealth allows me to avoid them? Who is unable to repay me?

This will look different in different contexts, but one thing it shouldn’t look like anywhere is hollow charity. We can only celebrate with people we’ve actually built relationships with—people who we don’t expect to “repay” us but whose gifts we would graciously accept. Feasting closely relates to another historic Christian practice: hospitality. True hospitality is mutual without being reciprocal. We don’t look to only give what we can get in return, but we also never put ourselves in the social position of only giving aid and never receiving it.

Fasting and feasting are important during an election season because they help us break the cycle of scarcity and competition that motivates much of our politics. These disciplines give us opportunities to learn from the perspectives of others, especially the most marginalized. They remind us in intimate ways that our consumption practices impact other people, on small and large scales. They foster the kind of relationships that move beyond “common ground” or tolerance and into belonging.

Endnotes

- ¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1958), 26-27.
- ² Kyle David Bennett, *Practices of Love: Spiritual Disciplines for the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2017), 12.
- ³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 80.
- ⁴ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 17.
- ⁵ Bennett, *Practices of Love*, 61.
- ⁶ Aristides, *Apology*, in *The Early Christians in their Own Words*, ed. Eberhard Arnold (Walden, NY: Plough, 1970), 109-11.