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THE BALLOT AND THE BIBLE



HOW SCRIPTURE HAS BEEN USED AND
ABUSED IN AMERICAN POLITICS
AND WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

STUDY GUIDE

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This study guide for *The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here* includes three parts: discussion questions, a practice section that gives your group the opportunity to read and interpret a relevant biblical passage, and a response section to help you continue to reflect on the themes from that chapter throughout the week. This reflection is an opportunity for individuals to do “audits” of their own Bible-reading habits as well as their media consumption and personal conversation habits. That work of self-reflection is just as important as learning from the history and hermeneutics in these chapters. Understanding our own feelings, our initial responses to theological ideas, and our ingrained habits for reading the Bible is crucially important for us to become better readers of Scripture. This work of learning will be greatly enhanced if groups can spend time not only discussing these questions and interpreting Scripture together but also sharing their reflections from the previous week and praying for one another. Individuals can also use this guide to do the exercises and reflect on these questions personally, but the work of spiritual formation and biblical interpretation is best done in community.

Introduction: Is That Your Bible?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you think about using the Bible in politics, what comes to mind? What feelings, ideas, or specific examples pop into your head?
2. What worries you about the Bible being used in political life? What makes you excited or hopeful?
3. When you hear a politician quote the Bible, does that change your opinion of them? Why or why not? Does it depend on who it is and why they are quoting the Bible?
4. Have you ever been in a heated political conversation in which Scripture was used? How did it go?
5. Do you go to the Bible for political guidance? How do you know where to look or how to interpret it?
6. When you think about using the Bible in political conversations or to make your own political decisions, what questions do you have? What makes interpreting the Bible to answer political questions difficult? What do you hope to learn in this book that could help you?

PRACTICE

Read Psalm 19 and 2 Timothy 3:10–17. What do we learn from these passages about God’s general revelation, about Scripture, and about how these relate to our whole lives? Spend time thinking about the larger context of the passages and pay attention to what words are used to describe God’s revelation. Think about how these two passages from the Old and New Testament relate to each other. How can these passages shape how we think about the Bible in political life?

RESPONSE

Spend time this week noticing where and when the Bible comes up, in political contexts or not. Do you hear Scripture quoted on social media, in conversations at the dinner table, on cable news, or in other media like TV shows or movies? Pay attention to what context it is quoted in, how it is used, and how you feel when you hear it.

Chapter 1: A City on a Hill: An American Legacy of Puritan Biblical Interpretation

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you hear the phrase “a city on a hill,” what comes to mind? Be specific. Do certain images, ideas, or feelings come to mind?
2. Does knowing more about the history of this phrase change how you think about it?
3. What does it mean for Christians that so much biblical language has shaped America’s history, starting with its founding? Is this good or bad, and in what ways?
4. How can we tell whom a passage is directed to? Does it matter? How?
5. How should we learn from passages directed toward Israel? How should we learn from letters written to specific early churches?
6. God has not made a specific covenant with America, but the Bible does contain important truths for America. How can we tell the difference between these ideas when we’re interpreting the Bible?
7. Do you tend to think that everything is always getting better or that things will inevitably get worse? How does Scripture teach us to think about time and to know “what time” we’re in now?

PRACTICE

Read Matthew 5. If you have time, read the entire Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. What from this passage is helpful for thinking about faithful Christian life in the world? What is helpful for thinking about our political lives specifically? How does the passage shape our thinking about “a city on a hill”?

RESPONSE

This week consider the stories you hear about America. Spend time thinking about where you hear these stories (on the news, on social media, in conversations with friends and family), what they say about America, and where they come from. What biblical language do you hear used? How do these stories make you feel? Then consider where in the Bible you read about nations. What nations are named? When are the nations talked about in a group, and what is said about them? Where do you find yourself or your nation in these stories?

Chapter 2: Submission and Revolution: Romans 13 and American Identity

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you heard Romans 13 used in political conversations or contexts? What were your initial thoughts or feelings about the passage?
2. What are your initial thoughts or feelings about the Revolutionary War? Is that an event in history you're interested in? What do you know about it? Does it feel important to you?
3. What from the history in this chapter surprised you?
4. Did anything from this chapter change how you think about "political" preaching?
5. Romans 13 is one passage we often go to when it comes to political questions. What other passages do you find yourself, others, or your community or church going to in order to answer political questions?
6. There are a few different kinds of context when it comes to biblical passages: the literary context (the words around the passage), the historical context (what was happening when the text was written), and the theological context (what the rest of Scripture teaches). How can we keep our interpretation of biblical passages rooted in all these contexts?
7. How can we tell when to say, "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29) and when to say, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1)? Are there specific examples you can think through?

PRACTICE

Read Romans 13:1–7. If you have time, read the entire chapter or even Romans 12–13. What about the larger context of this passage might shape how you read verses 1–7? What about the historical context or theological context? Try to imagine interpreting this passage in different political contexts today: What does this passage have to say to Christians in America, Christians without political power living under tyrannical governments, or Christians living in nations with a close relationship between the church and state?

RESPONSE

This week pay attention to how the government is described in conversations with friends and family, on social media, in the news, and in the books or movies you consume. When is the description positive, when is it negative, and why? Take a piece of media—a news clip, an article, a social media post—and analyze what underlying story it is telling about government, human communities, and individuals.

Chapter 3: “The Bible through Slave-Holding Spectacles”: The Bible in the Civil War

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did any of the Civil War history in this chapter surprise you? How would you summarize how different people in that period treated Scripture?
2. What passages did proslavery people rely on? What passages did white abolitionists rely on?
3. What arguments from this period were most convincing to you and why?
4. The “curse of Ham” might seem far-fetched to us today, but can you think of examples from the present time in which people have interpreted a verse in a specific and unusual way and then extrapolated it out into a larger theory?
5. How do we know when to interpret passages to have a material or a spiritual meaning (for example, the “freedom” in Gal. 5:1)?
6. What can we learn from enslaved and free Black interpreters of Scripture in this period? How can their witness shape how we read the Bible?
7. How can we learn from marginalized and oppressed interpreters of Scripture today?

PRACTICE

Read Exodus 15:1–21. If you have time, read a few of the previous chapters describing the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. What did you notice in this passage? Does knowing that this is a song, embedded in a narrative, rather than a list of laws or a letter change your interpretation? What continual significance and meaning does this passage have today? Who has shaped your understanding of this passage?

RESPONSE

Evaluate the sources you regularly consume. Whom do you trust and listen to when it comes to political information, news, or biblical interpretation? What can you do to broaden the sources you learn from? Ask yourself this week, Who is missing from the sources I regularly consult? How can I intentionally learn from people with marginalized perspectives?

Chapter 4: Your Kingdom Come: Social Gospel Hermeneutics

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your definition of the “social gospel” before reading this chapter? What is your definition after reading it?
2. How would you articulate the relationship between the gospel and social reform?
3. In this period, many theologians and pastors were concerned to reconcile Scripture with modern science and history. How do you think about the relationship between the Bible and science or history?
4. How can we know when to apply biblical commands, promises, or ideas to nations and when to apply them to individuals, Israel, or the church?
5. Do you tend to be optimistic or pessimistic about the human ability to change societies? Why? Where do you find biblical support for each view? Is there a balance between the two?
6. Social gospel theologians and pastors highlighted portions of the Bible that their peers had largely ignored (taking seriously the commands in the Sermon on the Mount, reading the Old Testament prophets against the injustices of their day). What parts of the Bible do you tend to avoid? Why?

PRACTICE

Read Isaiah 1. Whom is this addressed to? What difference in interpretation does that make? Does this passage still apply to us today? How? Do parts of this passage make you uncomfortable? Why? How does this passage fit within the larger story of Israel and within the larger story of Scripture?

RESPONSE

Spend time this week poking around in parts of the Bible you typically avoid. Think about what could change your approach to them: Do you have ideas that they're boring or irrelevant that you need to explore? Could a book by a scholar or an author you trust help you understand them better? Try reading them out loud or thinking through them with a friend. Spend time reflecting on why you avoid them and think about how that might be affecting your theology, your practices, and your life.

Chapter 5: A Stick of Dynamite: Civil Rights and Scripture

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter gave examples of biblical passages that were used by the civil rights movement or against it. Which one stood out to you the most? Do you think it was a good interpretation?
2. Does the description in this chapter of the way Christian faith motivated much of the civil rights movement change any of your thoughts about the relationship between religion and politics?
3. Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted often in American politics today, and like the Bible, he can be misinterpreted and used in all sorts of contradictory ways. How have you seen MLK used in political conversations? What do you think we can learn from him about politics and interpreting Scripture?
4. Read MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech (you can find it easily online) or listen to it. What do you notice about his use of Scripture?
5. What do you think it means for the Bible to be "the church's book"? Is that true?
6. How can we "step into" Scripture today? Can you think of a time when Scripture seemed to be speaking directly into a situation or conflict you were in? How can we allow the Bible to be alive and active to us today?

PRACTICE

Read Isaiah 40. Think about where you've heard the various lines of this chapter before: in speeches, in sermons, and especially in the New Testament. Think about what you know about the entire book of Isaiah and about Israel's history. How do these promises fit into the broader scriptural story?

RESPONSE

This week as you read your Bible, think about where you see yourself in the text. If you read a story, consider what character you identify with. If you read a prophetic book or an epistle, think about what parts you feel are addressed to you. Reflect on why you felt the way you did, why you identified with the parts of the story that you did, and how seeing yourself in a different position in the text might change your interpretation.

Chapter 6: Magic of the Market: The Hermeneutics of Small Government

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you hear the phrase “small government,” what do you think?
2. Was anything about the history in this chapter surprising? If you were alive during this history, what do you remember about this period?
3. Does the Bible have anything to say about modern-day economics? How can we apply Old Testament law or Jesus’s teachings to economic questions today?
4. What interpretations in this chapter were convincing or unconvincing to you?
5. Do you tend to interpret the Bible as if it’s addressed to individuals or to a community? How can we understand the ways it is addressed to both?
6. How can Scripture help us interpret economic and political information we get from other sources?

PRACTICE

Read Leviticus 25. Think about the context of these laws and the entire history of Israel. We can’t pull a fully formed economic policy out of this passage, but what can we learn from it about God’s desire for his people, God’s plan for human communities, and the pitfalls to expect when it comes to money, land, and families?

RESPONSE

Spend this week thinking about how you hear the Bible used in relation to economic questions. Spend time reading passages that talk about money (for example, Exod. 22:25–27; Eccles. 5:8–20; Matt. 19:16–30; 1 Tim. 6:6–10; James 5:1–6) and think about when you’ve heard those passages taught or preached. When it comes to your own money, what biblical passages have shaped what you do with it?

Chapter 7: Late Great United States: Biblical Eschatology in the Cold War

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your experience with biblical prophecy? Have interpretations of Revelation or Daniel been important in your spiritual life or at churches or schools you attended? What about the Old Testament prophetic books, like Jeremiah or Isaiah?
2. How can better understanding the fears and anxieties that animated prophecy interpretation in the Cold War affect our interpretation today? Are there parallels between those fears of nuclear annihilation and any fears or political situations in our context?
3. What is your understanding of the end times? When you think about the return of Christ to earth or the book of Revelation, how do you feel?
4. What primary metaphor describes how you think about the Bible: guidebook for life, puzzle to decipher, textbook of ancient history?
5. Where in Revelation do you see future prediction, critique, and comfort?
6. How does Revelation fit into the larger story Scripture tells?

PRACTICE

Read Revelation 1–3. How does this introduction to the book of Revelation shape how we read the rest of it? What does the first chapter tell us about what kind of book it is? How do the letters in chapters 2 and 3 shape how we read the rest of the book? How can Revelation instruct us in our political lives today?

RESPONSE

Pay attention this week to the different ways prophecy and apocalyptic operate in American political life. Do you see a self-proclaimed prophet on social media, either making specific predictions about politics or flipping proverbial tables with a fiery post? Do you hear apocalyptic stories on the news? Who is claiming that the next election is the “most important in our lifetime” or that if we don’t act now we’ll doom future generations? Pay attention to these stories and the way they make you feel.

Chapter 8: Prayer, Politics, and Personal Faith: George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's Use of Scripture

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does it matter to you whether the president (or any other elected official) is a Christian?
If yes, why?
2. What matters most to you when it comes to elected officials: that they share Christian identity, they use biblical language, or they support policies you consider Christian?
3. Think of a specific example from your own lifetime of a president quoting the Bible.
Was it a good interpretation?
4. Is there room for Christian convictions in a pluralistic nation? What does it look like to advocate for policies in public as a Christian while respecting others?
5. Were any of George W. Bush's or Barack Obama's biblical references surprising to you?
Did you think they were good interpretations?
6. What factors do you consider when deciding whom to vote for? Are there biblical principles you rely on?

PRACTICE

Read 1 John 3:11–24. Consider the context of the letter and passage. What does this passage require of you or your community right now? Does this passage help us think about our Christian convictions and obligations in relationship to the larger world?

RESPONSE

Pay attention to elected officials this week—what they say and do. How does their language signify the community they want to belong to? What sources do they use to rally support or criticize their opponents? Think about how you are learning what candidates to support, what characteristics to value, and what stories to love.

Chapter 9: “Give unto Caesar What Is Caesar’s”: Evangelicals and Trump

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard someone use the phrase “give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” in a political discussion? What did you think they meant by it?
2. What other Scripture passages have you heard people reference in support of political disengagement? Do you think those were good interpretations?
3. How would you describe your understanding of the relationship between the personal and the political? Are there parts of the Bible that apply to the personal and parts that apply to the political?
4. How do you think that spiritual and earthly authority should relate?
5. What do you think Jesus meant by “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Luke 20:25)?
6. Where does God’s authority over us override earthly authority? How do we know?

PRACTICE

Read Philippians 3:15–21. If you have time, read all of chapter 3. How does the larger context shape how we interpret verse 20? How does the rest of Scripture help us interpret what is meant by “earthly things” in this passage? What does “citizenship” mean here?

RESPONSE

Spend time this week thinking about the “rules” you have for your personal and political life. Do you separate your life into a personal and a political part? Pay attention to how this idea is communicated in all kinds of media. Where do you hear things like “that’s just politics” or “we’re not electing a Sunday school teacher”?

Chapter 10: Seek the Peace and Prosperity of the City: Jeremiah 29 and Political Theology

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard Christians talk about “seeking the peace of the city” before? In what contexts? What did they mean by “the peace” and “the city”?
2. How does looking at different interpretations throughout history help us be more faithful interpreters of Scripture today?
3. The image of “exile” is a powerful idea in Scripture. How is it a helpful idea for thinking about Christian life in the world, and how might it be unhelpful?
4. What do you want to take from the different interpretations of Augustine, Calvin, and Brueggemann? What do you want to leave?
5. This chapter showed how the political context of these interpreters shaped their interpretation. How do you think your political context shapes your theology?
6. Jeremiah was deeply concerned that God’s people interpret God’s word rightly. How do we know if we are hearing rightly?

PRACTICE

Read Jeremiah 29. How does the context of the letter (who wrote it, whom it was written to, their situation) shape your interpretation? Where do you see ideas from this passage elsewhere in Scripture? What does this passage require of God’s people today, and what does it preclude?

RESPONSE

It is not surprising that many people are fed up with politics these days. Pay attention this week to how people express their frustration or disengagement. How does thinking about politics—an upcoming election, a contested issue, a controversial elected official—make you feel? Do you find yourself exhausted by politics or motivated to engage? Why?

Conclusion: The Promise and Peril of Biblical References in Politics

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the “promise” of biblical references in political life is? What are the “perils”?
2. How can we hear the word of God against us? What kind of community would we need to be in order to hear such a word? What practices or habits would need to shape us?
3. We’ve talked a great deal about how to read God’s word rightly, but we’ve also been talking all along about the way to read God’s *world* rightly. What are some things you’ve learned about how to “read” the political context you’re in?
4. Can you think of a time when you read Scripture and realized it was a word against you? How did you realize that?
5. Where do you see hope in the church today?

PRACTICE

Return to Psalm 19 and 2 Timothy 3:10–17. Then read 2 Kings 22. How do each of these passages describe Scripture? How has your understanding of the Bible and its relationship to politics changed over these weeks? How can these passages continue to shape how we think about the Bible in political life?

RESPONSE

Spend time this week considering what could help you hear the word of God against you. What reading habits, spiritual disciplines, prayers, or community accountability could help you be able to hear a word against your current efforts, interests, or desires? How could you hear a word like that and hear it as a word ultimately for your good?