

Engaging Politics? Study Guide for Groups and Individuals

These study guides, these questions, are intended as discussion starters and pointers for further thought. They are not intended as a definitive set of questions, or as the final word on the topic. Of necessity, they will assume that you have read the book; however, they will confine themselves to the five case studies. You do not need to discuss all the questions under each chapter heading (at least, not all in one go!) I conclude each section with a short prayer.

Chapter 6: Let Us Make Poverty History:

‘We can take the calls’ – how would you respond to such an attitude? How do you keep going in the face of disinterest?

Steve Henry, in his book, *Change the World 9 to 5*, action 098, notes this:

- Something on the floor other than dirt puts you in the top 50 percent of the world’s wealthiest people.
- A home with a roof, a door, windows and more than one room puts you in the top 20 percent.
- A fridge and/or freezer in the home puts you in the top 5 percent.
- If you or your family has a car, a microwave, a video/[DVD] player, a computer and you have a door on your bathroom – then you are in the top 1 percent of the wealthiest people in the whole world.

In other words, most people are poorer than us. (see p. 100 of *Engaging Politics?*)

How often do you think of yourself as rich: ‘woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation’ [Luke 6:24]. Given the biblical strictures against wealth – especially when it is used selfishly [see Luke 12:13-21] – what do you think we should be doing as individuals, as groups, churches and nations with our wealth. How should we be using it?

In order to come alongside the poor – how are we to, along with Paulo Freire, to ‘make our Easter’?

The prophets condemn every kind of abuse, every form of keeping the poor in poverty or of creating new poor... Fraudulent commerce and exploitation are condemned (Hos. 12:8; Amos 8:5; Mic. 6:10-11; Isa. 3:14; Jer. 5:27; 6:12), as well as the hoarding of lands (Mic. 2:1-3; Ezek. 22:29; Hab. 2:5-6~), dishonest courts (Amos 5:7; Jer 22:13-17; Mic. 3:9-11; Isa. 5:23, 10:1-2), the violence of the ruling classes (2 Kings 23:30, 35; Amos 4:1; Mic. 3:1-2; 6:12; Jer. 22:13-17), slavery (Neh. 5:1-5;

Amos 2:6; 8:6), unjust taxes (Amos 4:1; 5:11-12), and unjust functionaries (Amos 5:7; Jer. 5:28). In the New Testament oppression by the rich is also condemned especially in Luke (6:24-25; 12:13-21; 16:19-31; 18:18-26) and in the letter of James (2:5-9; 4:13-17; 5:16)

This paragraph is from Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* [Revised edition, SCM Press, 1988], and it may be salutatory to look up some – if not all – the texts alluded to. What if anything has changed since biblical times? Why would these texts speak comfort to the poor that Gutierrez knows and lives among?

Ezekiel 16:49-50 tells us that the people of Sodom failed to assist the needy – see *Engaging Politics?* p. 104 – what does ‘the preferential option for the poor’ mean for us in our situation today?

Given that the World Bank and IMF impose domestic policy conditions in return for loans to Third World countries, should banks have the power to tell us how to spend the money they lend us? Or is the doctrine of ‘limited liability’ correct? (Limited liability means that banks generally have no responsibility over what you do with the money loaned to you – all they need to be concerned about is are they going to get their money back with interest.) Or is there some third way?

How do we get people out of a dependency culture while not denying our responsibility for our fellow human beings? (See p. 113-117)

Dealing with Poverty: the ‘big push’ or micro-finance? Or is this a false dichotomy? If so, why?

Father God, it is too easy to be overwhelmed. It is too easy to blame others. It is too easy to say that *we* can’t do anything because we can’t do much. Help us to read our Bibles and hear the news with clear eyes; and show us how to work for a just world where there is no servitude or oppression or alienation; and show that is how we are to work for the advent of the messiah.

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Chapter 7: Slavery

Just as I never expected that my favorite restaurant had become the hub for a trafficking ring, slavery likely crosses our path on a regular basis without our awareness. We may pass a construction site and never think twice whether the laborers work of their own volition. Or we might drive along city streets at night, see young girls on a street corner peddling their bodies, and wonder how they could ever “choose” such a life [*Not For Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade – and How We Can Fight It* David Batstone (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) p. 7]

What do you think of when you hear the word ‘slavery’? Which of the stories told on pp. 127-130 most gripped your imagination, and why?

Why do you think it took so long for William Wilberforce and his friends to outlaw the slave trade? Does this ‘long road’ have any parallels for today?

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve for 6 years, but in the seventh he shall go a free person, without debt ... But if the slave declares ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person’, then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life.’ [Exodus 21: 2, 5-6]

Were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God. [1 Corinthians 7: 21-24]

How should we argue against modern slavery as Christians when the Bible (as shown above) is clearly prepared to allow slavery? How would you answer those who say that, because the Bible is ambiguous about slavery, we should argue against slavery on other grounds?

Why do you think – despite knowing that 95% of the women trafficked for sexual exploitation ‘experienced some form of physical or sexual violence ...’ [p. 136] – so little is being done to help these women? Does it have anything to do with our sexualised culture and our supposed ‘freedom’ to have sex outside marriage?

Is there any reason not to reform our laws about the use of prostitutes along the Swedish lines [p. 137-8]? What do you think would be the arguments against such a reform?

Lord Jesus, who came to proclaim release to the captives, show us how we are to make that proclamation real for the 12 million who suffer the various forms of modern slavery. Give us your heart to be able to declare that freedom, so that every tear will be wiped away.

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Chapter 8: Love, Marriage and the Church

Well, did you (or would you) ‘take this man for an idiot?’ [p. 139] In other words, what did (what would) marriage mean for you?

In other words, if you do get married, you marry the wrong person.

‘Like any good law it is, of course reversible. You also always marry the right person. My law was . . . to help them [my students] see that the church rightly understands that we no more know the person we marry than we know ourselves.’ [Stanley Hauerwas, quoted on pp. 139-40]

Did you marry the wrong person? Did you marry the right person? If we don’t know the person we marry how should we choose a life partner? Should we look to other cultures and ‘arranged marriages’? If not, why not?

Beside the staff of life,
taken and fashioned from the heavy earth,
beside our marriage, work and war,
the free man, too, will live and grow toward the sun.
Not the ripe fruit alone –
blossom is lovely too . . .
Finest and rarest blossom, at a happy moment springing
from the freedom of a lightsome, daring, trusting spirit,
is a friend to a friend [see p. 143]

How would you feel if this poem had been written about/for you? Why do we need to assume that intimacy ‘must indicate a sexual relation’ [see p. 143]? How can we tackle the sexualisation of intimacy?

‘In other words, the church teaches that it is possible to survive without sex, but we cannot survive without relationships, without intimacy’ [p. 143]. How do we teach this positively, especially when we know that the sacrifice of the single person is that ‘of giving up heirs’ [p. 141]?

Mike Pilavachi founder of the Soul Survivor youth organization, tells a ... story of a clergyman friend who won’t let his twelve-year-old daughter sit on his lap any more “in case anyone gets the wrong idea.” Mike continues: “I wanted to shake him and say, ‘Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare give in to the prejudices of society. She is your kid, she is your daughter: Not sit on your lap? If you take all of that away, where is she going to look for intimacy?’” [see p. 144]

How do we avoid giving in ‘to the prejudices of society’?

Friendship is founded on likeness and agreement, accompanied by mutual regard and affection. Friends will be able to see themselves more clearly and truly through the eyes of a good friend . . . Friendship is good will toward one another and willing good for one another . . . Friends avoid pretense and useless flattery. They correct one another in cases of wrongdoing, and they suffer each other's troubles . . . [G]ood friendships are open to risk, growth, and the goodness of other friends. [Quoted on p. 145]

How do we encourage good friendships within and outside our churches?

What would have been your advice to "Gemma"? [see pp. 146-7]

How would you react to the anonymous, homosexual Christian who finds that his 'position on homosexuality – while it may be realistic and grounded in true experience – seems to offend many and please almost no one' [p. 148]?

Three questions from p. 149 for you to consider:

- What cultural attitudes about sex must be rejected in a Christian context?
- Do we need to open the church to lesbians and gay men as the early Church was opened to the Gentiles?
- How should we respond pastorally to lesbian and gay Christians?

So I want to end with three questions [see p. 155 – the themes of which are similar to what has been covered in other questions above, but it is worth trying to focus our minds:].

The first is to those who might wish to revise, or ignore, the teachings of both scripture and the historic church about the exclusive sexual nature of marriage and about homosexuality: "Why must sanctifying friendships be sexually explicit;" can there not be other satisfying ways of sharing life together "without the stimulation of genitalia?" The second question is for those who cannot, or will not, accept such revisionist proposals: how do we accept and live with difference within the body of Christ? How can we meet, love and share – how can we be hospitable with – our brothers and sisters with whom we do not agree?

And thirdly, how far are we in the church willing to tackle society and its fear of intimacy allied to its glorification of overt sexuality, to show that there is another way – that "the long haul" may not appear as glamorous, but involves more romance, more joy and more life in the end?

Father God, teach us not to stand in judgement over our fellows, who have your image upon them. As we seek to love them, as we seek to challenge the culture, in which we all live, where it advocates a hollow hedonism, rather than the heroic path of true love, help us to see with your eyes and to feel with your heart.

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Chapter 9: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century

Where is God in the war on terror? How do we – as Christians – answer those who insist on being ‘realistic’ against the church that tries to speak peace at this time of war?

“If this is war, then Bin Laden has won” because “[h]e thinks he is a warrior not a murderer” [quoted on p. 157]. Is Hauerwas right? Why – or why not?

How do you interpret the commandment, “thou shalt not kill”? Is it the case that ‘it is private vengeance that is forbidden, rather than the public policy of killing in war’ [p. 158]?

Given that ‘all empires have engaged in war. All states use coercion to bend both its subjects and other states to its will. Sometimes this coercion involves war, war itself being “nothing but the continuation of policy by other means.” [See p. 160], how should the church – then or now – ‘speak truth to power’?

Can we return to the idea that ‘soldiers must do penance after involvement in war’ – should the same principle apply to the politicians who send them to war? If so, how?

How far does the Just war theory, in your opinion, allow us to ‘enact just judgment even in the theatre of war’ [see p. 162]? Does a pacifist stance mean that just judgment cannot be so exercised in the theatre of war?

Has God beat the swords of the nations into plowshares? Or *will* he [p. 163]? Or is this merely an example of the eschatological tension, with God’s kingdom being both now *and* not yet? If it is such an example, how do we continue to engage with the world in this tension?

Given that as Milbank notes, in all punishment, or coercion, “however mild and benignly motivated, there is still present a moment of ‘pure’ violence, externally and arbitrarily related to the end one has in mind” [see p. 164], can we punish ‘peaceably’? Or do we need to accept Augustinian dilemma that punishment could lead to a person’s destruction, but that leaving that person unpunished could “lead to someone else being destroyed”?

Jesus did not say blessed are those who keep the peace; blessed are those who do nothing to promote war; but blessed are the peacemakers (see Matthew 5:9).

Peacemaking is not magic ... it is a great costly positive principle. Peacemakers must move back across the divide of hostility. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," commands Jesus ([Matthew] 5:44). The Son of God requires us to go through barriers that have hitherto led to war, and to be for the enemy, for their good ... This approach is costly, as the Gospels show. It leads to persecution and insults, but it breaks the casual law of evil with the power of the love of God [see p. 166].

In terms of peacemaking, what do we, who claim to follow the Prince of Peace, have to say? More importantly, what do we do? And how do we prepare ourselves for the reaction of the world?

Given that 'whether something "works" is not the basic criterion of Christian action', how are we to discern when a call to peace over-rides any 'suffering, death and apparent failure' [pp. 168-9]? How far do you agree with Freire's comment that 'the church is born to die shivering with the cold'?

Peace of God or world peace – are these in tension, if so, how [see pp. 170-1]?

"It is the privilege of individual Christians to campaign one way or another for or against military action." Given their own views, were the bishops right to assert this? How could they have provided better leadership?

How are we to 'pursue war by other means' [p. 174]?

We pray for peacemakers round the world. For those who have taken risks with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, those who seek peace in the Sudan and other places. Father God, help us to take our cue from your early followers, who when they were persecuted, did not ask to be saved from their persecutors, but asked you to 'look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your [peaceable] word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal...' [Acts 4:29-30]. In this too, we pray

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Chapter 10: A Wonderful World? The Environment

We can cope with a little more heat – can't we [p. 175]? What are your thoughts as you read that question – has climate change affected *you* yet?

How do you react to my critique of the Christian Right's dodgy eschatology [pp. 176-7]? How do we set about changing people's minds on this issue?

But “the American way of life and national security serve to legitimate the escalation of global warming through withdrawing from the Kyoto Accord, and isn't this an act of anticreational and unneighborly violence?” [Quoted on p. 176] Well, is it, or isn't it?

“[T]he ground and the animals over which I am lord constitute the world in which I live, *without which I cease to be.*” [Quoted on p. 179] How do we remind people of this essential truth, and get them to act on it before it is too late?

The Stern Review, commissioned by the British government, and which reported in late 2006, tells us that ‘[o]n current trends, average global temperatures will rise by 2-3°C within the next fifty years or so.’ Of course, if emissions continue to grow, then there will be even more warming. There will be several results of this – here I will just quote one:

Rising sea levels will result in tens to hundreds of millions more people flooded each year with warming of 3 or 4°C. There will be serious risks and increasing pressures for coastal protection in South East Asia... small islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and large coastal cities, such as Tokyo, New York, Cairo and London... [Quoted on p. 179].

There will come a point when climate change will affect us in the West (floods in New York and London), if it isn't already (hurricane Katrina). How do encourage and call for action now to avert further disaster?

Of course, in serving God, we need to serve each other, and that inevitably includes – indeed it must include, the poorer brothers and sisters who are already losing homes and livelihoods due to global warming. And, equally of course, the evidence for global warming is overwhelming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ‘has documented the steady rise in global temperatures over the last fifty years, [and] projects that the average

global temperature will continue to rise in the coming decades, and attributes “most of the warming” to human activities’ [p. 180] How can we, as individuals, churches, nations, enact Stern’s recommendations [quoted on p. 181]:

- Reducing demand for emissions-intensive goods and services.
- Increased efficiency, which can save both money and emissions.
- Action on non-energy emissions, such as avoiding deforestation.
- Switching to lower-carbon technologies for power, heat and transport.

If we look at the sweep of scripture, we can see that “human rebellion and sin result in the land mourning” [p. 184]. How do we repent of our environmental sin, and plead with God not to enact his promises that he will bring “fiery heat and drought”?

How far have you got with enacting Tearfund’s list of action points quoted on pp. 186-7?

Given that the earth ‘is to be made new – it is not going to be re-created *ex nihilo*’ [n. 636, p. 189], what do you think that new earth will look like (especially if we do nothing about climate change)?

We pray ‘your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven’ – how are we to work best as God’s co-workers challenging the environmental injustices of the Western world?

Father God, we confess that we have too readily listened to the prophets of the Enlightenment that we are the masters of the universe, we are in control, that we can do as we please; unaware that your creation is all co-dependent, and we are dependent on it, even as we are given stewardship over it. Remind us continually that the earth is yours and everything in it; and show us, we pray, how to love our neighbour with a love that does no harm to that neighbour’s environment.

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.