

## **Citizen: Faithful Discipleship in a Partisan World**

### **Discussion Guide for Participants**

This book proposes a framework for faithful Christians to engage in political discourse by remembering and living out our primary commitment to Jesus Christ. We are dual citizens; that is, we are citizens of God's reign first and citizens of our nation second. While acknowledging the polarities in our national political life, this framework helps us assess the various issues of our time so that we can advocate for a common life that reflects our values.

### **Introduction – Engaging an Apathetic Christian Citizen**

#### **Chapter 1 – A Birth Narrative**

Christians define politics as the primary relationship between citizens and systems that govern their community. (p. xviii)

Bishop Doyle is concerned with the role and work of Christian citizens in shaping the systems of authority that affect community, nation, and the world. (p xix)

Jesus was left out of our founding documents intentionally.

Bishop Doyle talks about why he wrote the book and what he hopes readers might get out of a shared study.

Questions to consider:

- What interests you about the idea of Christian citizenship? What do you hope to learn from the book and other readers?
- What concerns do you have about faithful political engagement in this period of our country's history?

#### **Chapters 2 - Our Beloved Civil Religion**

“It is the work of this book to remind Christians of the story of their citizenship in the reign of God.” (p. 31)

Before giving us a framework for helping us engage in political discourse, Bishop Doyle outlines some characteristics of our national life that affect the way we understand citizenship generally, and American citizenship specifically.

We have a civil religion that sometimes refers to God, but is different from our Christian faith. Page 20 identifies some key characteristics.

Bishop Doyle writes that American civil religion is a variant of moral therapeutic deism. Moral therapeutic deism has many of the characteristics of Christian beliefs - such as a belief in God - but it replaces the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of self and

prioritizes personal happiness.

Questions to consider:

- What characteristics have you observed in American civil religion?
- How are the tenets of moral therapeutic deism similar to or different from Christian faith? (p. 20)
- What are the downsides of merging American civil religion with Christian faith?

### **Chapter 3 – A Frame for Christian Citizenship**

Bishop Doyle uses the acronym WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic) to describe the mindset of people who live in America. This mindset prioritizes:

High levels of individualism, a focus on the self, rather than relationships with others  
Reliance on analytical thinking over holistic approaches to problems  
Focus on people's intentions and desires instead of their actions

Questions to consider:

- How does being WEIRD affect the way we understand our relationships with people outside of our immediate families and friend groups? How does it affect what we consider our obligations?
- What aspects of your faith can help you understand the difference between WEIRD and non-WEIRD ways of thinking about how you relate to your neighbors, your city, and the world? (pp. 32-33)

### **Chapters 4 – A Garden Social Imaginary**

Our narrative framework is that of the Garden.

Bishop Doyle uses the term “imaginary” in a very specific way that may be unfamiliar to you. What it means is something like “a collective picture” that is derived from shared values, institutions, laws, and symbols and through which we have a shared image of our society or group. It is the way we imagine and work to maintain our society. It includes what we think is right, what is worth striving for, and how we all fit together. It is the imagined system that holds a society together.

One way to think of a social imaginary is to compare it to a game like Monopoly. The game only works when all the players know and agree to certain rules. They take turns, they roll the dice to determine how far to move, they follow the directions on the board or the cards they draw. The rules are made up, but they work because everyone follows them - and not only that, the players agree to enter the world of the game, the names it gives things, the way winners are determined.

The same is true of American society. It works to the extent that we all know and agree

to shared values, institutions, laws, and symbols.

Since we are dual citizens, however, Bishop Doyle lifts up an alternate social imaginary that guides us - it is the social imaginary of the Garden, a way to understand our citizenship in the reign of God.

Questions to consider:

- What are the characteristics of the Garden Imaginary? How does it differ from the American social imaginary?

## **Chapter 5 – Rejection of Dominion Politics**

The story God invites us into means we have communal responsibilities; we have an obligation to hold institutions, governments, and nations accountable.

The shadow side of the Garden Imaginary is dominion. Bishop Doyle describes the entry of sin into the story as sibling rivalry and scapegoating. When humans seek dominion over one another it leads to violence.

The story of Abraham rejects violence.

- God's blessing of Abraham transcends national boundaries and is promised to all. This is part of our ethos as Christian citizens.
- God's rejection of the sacrifice of Isaac is made in opposition to the sacrifices other gods/nations require.

Bishop Doyle uses the term "mimetic" to describe the way we imitate the violence we've become part of. When we live in an environment defined by violence, we begin to accept its terms as normative; we begin to desire the benefits it promises. Christian citizens are invited to break the cycles of violence.

Questions to consider:

- What habits or daily occurrences do you see as examples of mimetic violence or subjugation?
- Have you seen examples of people working to break those cycles of violence?

## **Chapter 6 - Prophetic Citizenship**

Christian citizenship is prophetic because it is an alternative to citizenship in thrall to empire. (p. 56)

In the story of Moses and the Exodus, we see the contrast between the Garden and the Empire. This is most stark in the treatment of the poor. Empire focuses on its own needs and expansion. The Garden is interested in the people, in relationship.

The violence of Empire causes people to forget the blessing they have been to each other - Israel to Egypt and Egypt to Israel. The way back to peace, to the Garden, is through mending broken relationships.

Questions to consider:

- If Christian citizenship is prophetic, what alternatives do you see yourself and your Christian community offering to the wider culture?
- The Exodus story is often used as a metaphor for various American experiences. In what ways do you experience being on the side of Empire? On the side of Shalom?

### **Chapter 7 – A Differentiated Wilderness Society**

Bishop Doyle describes the wilderness in the Exodus story as a place of formation and the commandments received there as a guide for a community living into blessings and grace. (p. 69)

Questions to consider:

- If the wilderness is a place of formation, what is our wilderness today?
- How are we invited to live the blessings and grace offered to us in our wilderness?

### **Chapter 8 – The Rise of King and Prophet**

Humans are not created to rule over each other. Yet we humans keep craving and creating systems of dominion in which to live. God invites us to create societies grounded in compassion and faithfulness. (page 80)

What we see in scripture and all around us is the reality that nations face consequences for their corporate behavior. Kings (and our modern equivalents) always use power for domination. Prophets (and Christian citizens) work to reverse those systems and hold power accountable.

Questions to consider:

- How have you seen Christian citizens hold American power accountable?
- What systems of oppression and dominion do you see in your community?
- How can Christian citizens offer an alternative?

### **Chapter 9 – A Step into God's Story**

Read the Howard Thurman quote on page 93.

We are invited into God's story, not the other way around. In Christian scripture we have a re-telling of God's story. In the first one, God created humanity from man. In the second, God re-creates humanity from woman. That re-creation is framed by Mary's song.

Questions to consider:

- What elements of Mary's Song mirror the Garden Imaginary?

The story of Jesus in the wilderness is a retelling of the entry of sin into the world. Instead of rivalry and dominion, Jesus had radical trust in God.

Bishop Doyle notes that the temptations Jesus faces are similar in kind to what the church faces today.

Questions to consider:

- How do you see those temptations pulling at the church - and at you?

## **Chapter 10 – A Different Destiny**

One of the things we see in the Garden Imaginary as a framework for human life is that violence is not the intention for creation. The Gospels announce that the reign of God has implications for everyday life. Bishop Doyle points us to John the Baptist and Jesus' beatitudes for the characteristics of the reign of God.

- The first citizens in this reign are the least, the poor.
- The second citizens are the peacemakers

Jesus lifts up a new way of living that centers on community and holds community together without violence. This includes:

- Forgiveness
- Shared resources
- Addressing problems with the needs of the whole in mind

Questions to consider:

- Who are the "first" citizens of nations today?
- Who would be considered the first and second citizens of the reign of God in our American context today?

## **Chapter 11 – A Decolonized Citizenship**

The story of the Gerasene demoniac shows what happens when violence takes hold of human life. The demoniac's body and mind are occupied by a violent force - and that force is named after the Roman army. Jesus offers him a different way to live. The man

had been cast out of the community, now he is restored to community and the occupying force is cast out.

Jesus demonstrates good leadership when he feeds the poor - he, in fact, does the work that the king should be doing. The political and economic systems we live in rely on the “myth of scarcity.” The economy of Jesus is not based on scarcity, but on plenty. There is enough for all to be fed and cared for.

Questions to consider:

- What violent forces occupy our communities? What people do we cast out? How can they be welcomed back in?
- In what ways can we enact the reality of God’s plenty when it comes to caring for all?

## **Chapter 12 – The Story of the Disinherited**

The people who gathered around Jesus were outsiders. He includes them as family. This goes against the social structures of his culture - and perhaps ours as well. Individualism is a modern value in our civil religion, not a Biblical one. The Garden Social Imaginary lifts up interdependence as a value.

Questions to consider:

- Whom do we consider “outsiders” in our culture? Whom do we shame and exclude?
- Have you seen examples of ways to bring into relationship people and groups who have been marginalized?
- What habits can we develop to live more interconnected, interdependent lives?

## **Chapter 13 - The Hive Lens**

Jesus gives us examples of interdependent living. Sometimes our larger communities segregate into “hives,” we divide ourselves according to race, class, religion, etc. We then turn God’s story into one that pits “us” against “them” - whoever “they” might be. Jesus invites us into a way of life that includes all people, and we keep turning it into codes that people violate or systems they can’t fit into.

Interdependent life includes suffering. We will enter the suffering of others and we will suffer when we try to change the systems that oppress them. When the powerful benefit from the suffering of others, the Christian citizen will take on the cause of the ones who are vulnerable.

Questions to consider:

- Bishop Doyle uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate our call to compassion and the bonds of community. Where do you see yourself in this story?
- Where do you see the church today?
- How can we do better?

## **Chapter 14 - Vineyard, Sword, Cross**

Note that the constitution says nothing about separation of church and state. (p. 151) The church has a role in addressing political issues, in critiquing the systems and actions of the state. There is no place for creating a “Christian nation,” or theocracy. Faith should not be used for gain. At the same time, we are called to participate in the common life of our nation and not isolate the church.

Bishop Doyle writes that where Jesus “goes, what he does, who he meets, and what he says are ways the community of shalom works in the world around us. It is the work of the Christian citizen to own up to our part in this system and to resist powers, authorities, and the violence they beget in this world.” (Page 160)

Questions to consider:

- How is the separation of church and state misunderstood/misused today?
- How is the agenda of a Christian citizen different from the agenda of the state? Where do the agendas intersect?
- What are the opportunities in your life to resist powers, authorities, and violence?

## **Chapter 15 – The State’s Accountability to God**

Romans 13:1-7

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God’s agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s agents, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

Paul says that the authorities are given power by the way God has given freedom to the world. (p. 170). This passage from Romans has been used to justify the use of violence to create order. Yet, we are reminded that before he talks about the power of the state, Paul writes about the obligations of Christians to love God and each other first.

(Read Romans 12)

It is a mistake to think that some parts of our lives as Christians are only private and do not intersect with our public obligations. The Garden Imaginary holds up values for us as individuals AND as communities, including states.

Questions to consider:

- What are the Garden values that a state/nation can enact?
- How can we hold governments accountable to those values? How can we take on institutions that abuse their power?

## **Chapter 16 – A Tabling Christian Citizenship and Conclusion**

On page 188 there is a nice summary of the book in the first full paragraph. It ends: “There are many ways that citizens can be involved. Christian citizens can do all of these things, but we must do them from the perspective of God’s narrative and our place in it.”

Bishop Doyle talks about our work as “tabling,” which is a way of thinking of our work as engaging others, including as many as we can, drawing others into conversation.

This book challenges us to “create relational capital.” (p. 195)

Questions to consider:

- Where are the places in your everyday life that you can draw others into conversation and action? What are the “tables” around which you can have engaging conversations about community life?
- Who are the people - different from you - that you can include? What points of view are missing in your community conversations? Who can you invite to the table?