

STUDY GUIDE
for
The Complete CLS Essays of James W. Skillen

Politics is a human enterprise, and the basis of political activity is our communal nature. As creatures created for community, we all have a calling, in some small or bold way, to be involved in “politics.” What this looks like is largely determined by the Christian faith we practice daily; the finer details must be discussed and perfected with fellow Christians.

As lawyers and law students, we must work out these ideas, and James Skillen’s articles provide a great springboard for this enterprise. Readers that are currently engaged in political action or desire to deepen their understanding of proper political *praxis* will find Skillen’s articles useful for study.

This study guide will serve as a tool to assist individual study or spur group discussion of Skillen’s essays. All of the essays are available online in full text (www.clsnet.org/Journal/Fall2012/index), but this guide is arranged around the print version of the *Journal of Christian Legal Thought* that includes full articles, abstracted articles, and a list of articles. Clicking on the name of the essay below will open the full-text version of the essay.

Full Text Articles

You Win Some . . . You Lose Some (1983)

1. What do we need to be faithful beyond that “13-game losing streak”?
2. Skillen wrote this article three decades ago. Where are Christians today in our thinking about court battles? Do we still think in terms of individual battles or have we seen a shift toward a “whole season” mentality?
3. What does it mean for us to see ourselves as “citizens with broad responsibilities to our neighbors”? Does this provide a framework for a larger political movement?
4. In light of Skillen’s advice, how might you take a new approach to the “many opportunities” God has placed before you? Do you need to take more personal initiative?

Needed: A Public Philosophy (1985)

1. Does authority exist pre-fall? Does government exist pre-fall?
2. Is our approach/avoidance relationship part of an inappropriate sacred/secular dichotomy?
3. Can our approach/avoidance relationship with government actually be solved by developing a public philosophy that considers human beings as communal creatures and government a blessing from God? Is something more needed? Why or why not?
4. What place does the autonomy of the individual have in community?

Suggested Reading: *The Quest for Community* by Robert Nisbet.

In . . . The World (Untitled) (1985)

1. To what extent should we allow our God-given abilities and inabilities to determine our political involvement?
2. To what extent should we allow our education or lack of education determine our course?
3. If involvement in politics isn't about quantity, but rather the quality of people, how should Christian's approach the public sphere? Is there an entry-level skill-set one needs?
4. Does Christ lead us into areas where there is little God-given talent and/or knowledge?

Suggested Reading: *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* by Gene Edward Veith.

Christian Service is Not a Parachurch Activity (1986)

1. Dr. Skillen makes the case that we act as parasites on society when we create a false sacred/secular dichotomy. Is this dichotomy really all that bad?
2. What does Skillen mean that we should be “. . . *inside* the reality of *being* God's people in *His* world”?
3. How can we begin the integration of the sacred and secular spheres that we have separated?

Suggested Reading: *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, by Michael W. Goheen and Craig Bartholomew; *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, by Albert M. Wolters.

Don't Just Do Something; Sit There! (1986)

1. Skillen seems to believe we are too pragmatic for our own good. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. In light of “splintered” basic principles – especially among Protestants, how does one go about creating a unified Christian philosophy?
3. Skillen believes creating unity is as simple as going in search of wisdom, patience, perseverance and other such virtues. Is he correct?
4. Have you seen evidence that Christians have unified politically since Skillen published this piece in 1986?

Suggested Reading: *Ideas Have Consequences* by Richard Weaver; *Ten Conservative Principles*, by Russell Kirk.

Christians: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution? (1987)

1. Aren't the problems that Skillen mentions at the beginning of the article (sexual immorality, unethical trading, financial crisis, etc.) merely a part of living in a fallen world? Isn't it the same today as it was 100 years ago?
2. With the current crisis of national and personal debt, international unrest, and a growing dislike of the War on Terror, what strengths can Christians bring to the table to be a part of the solution?
3. Do politically active Christ followers take the time to bring these strengths to the table? Can you think of examples?
4. Skillen seems to argue that Christians have divorced theory from praxis and run from responsibility much like the rest of our society. Is he right?

Suggested Reading: *Redeeming the Time* by Russell Kirk.

The Mandate for Justice (1987)

1. Christians have a duty to follow Christ and to do justice to those around them, but what responsibility does the Christian have to ensuring justice is carried out in the public sphere?
2. How should we as Christians respond to political injustice?
3. What is the greatest weapon Christians have in their current fight against domestic injustices like abortion, human trafficking, and religious bigotry?
4. Are there limits on the tools a Christian should use in addressing international issues of injustice? Domestic issues?

Suggested Reading: *God is Red* by Liao Yiwu (A story of how Christianity survived in Communist China because Christians were willing to “do justice.”); *The Good News About Injustice*, by Gary Haugen.

Step into My Office (1988)

1. In what ways are we seeing political leaders think of their power as something of their own making?
2. Can you think of a current example of a political leader overstepping his boundaries because of pride? How could this have been avoided?
3. What role do Christians play in limiting power? How can they effect change?
4. Discuss one of the areas God has given to you to shape. How have you succeeded in the past? How will you improve in the future?

Suggested Reading: *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* by Gene Edward Veith; *Redeeming Law: Christian Calling and the Legal Profession*, by Michael P. Schutt.

Another View of History? (1989)

1. Is there any validity to Fukuyama's opinion that history is reaching completion?
2. Christians and Hegelian thinkers can agree on one thing: history is headed somewhere. How can Christians use this common ground to communicate political truth?
3. In light of current moral/ethical/political issues, is this debate worth having? Is it really *that* important?
4. If this is a debate worth having, how do we begin to integrate a proper view of history into our own vocational and political philosophy?

Suggested Reading: *At the End of an Age* by John Lukacs; *From Dawn to Decadence*, by Jacques Barzun; *Everlasting Man*, by G.K. Chesterton.

Apocalyptic Visions in Times of Trouble (1991)

1. Is Skillen right when he says we have focused too much on the apocalyptic visions in Scripture, forgetting more hopeful pictures of union with Christ? What effect has this had on the political sphere in America?
2. Skillen suggests that a balanced perspective of the end times will help take the edge off of political chaos. Is he right? Why or why not?
3. Do you see any immediate affects such a shift in thought could have on the political sphere?
4. How can you personally comfort your brothers and sisters in Christ while also "spurring them on to love and good deeds" when the political scene seems bleak?
5. Is it "right" to despair of the political future? Why or why not?

Viewpoint: When Citizens Can't Agree (1994)

1. Is relativism still an issue today? Have we gone beyond relativism philosophically as a culture?
2. With the current lack of philosophical thought in the church, how do we move toward a principled, public philosophy in Christian political activity?
3. How do we as believers humbly assert Truth without wavering?
4. How are we, as Christians, both relativists and absolutists in our belief about God?

Suggested Reading: "The Culture of Hospitality" by Mark T. Mitchell (online at the Front Porch Republic).

Abstracted Essays

Christian Faith and Political Freedom: Can Christians Make a Constructive Contribution to Contemporary Politics? (1981)

1. Is Skillen's examination of various Augustinian traditions helpful? Why?
2. Does understanding the root of our disagreements help us engage others more effectively? Does Skillen's paper help in this regard?
3. How does a Christian "manifest a commitment to constructive politics" in light of a properly ordered view of the civic and political responsibilities of the Christian?
4. Do we still see the lack of unity among Christian cultural activity as Skillen points out? What can we do to encourage unity?
5. What are some practical steps you can take to ensure your own Christian cultural activity accords with your Christian worldview?
6. Are you making a positive, constructive contribution to contemporary politics?

Suggested Reading: "The Culture of Hospitality" by Mark T. Mitchell (online at the Front Porch Republic); *Honoring God in Red or Blue*, by Amy Black.

Creation, Evolution, and the Courts (1983)

1. If the First Amendment isn't the best framework for a debate on public education, what is? How should we begin framing the education debate?
2. Is Skillen correct in assuming that the creation/evolution debate is not for the court system to decide? Have the courts stepped outside their jurisdiction? Are there other debates taking place today?
3. Does the pluralistic model of education actually solve the problems that Skillen believes it will? Are there any concerns with giving education to local rule?
4. Furthermore, what steps need to be taken to overcome court precedents that allow no room for religion in the classroom?

Luther and Marx (1984)

1. Give an example of where you or others have placed hope in "historical dead-ends" rather than in Christ.
2. What place do ideologies such as Capitalism, Marxism, Liberalism, Conservatism, and the like have in Christianity?
3. What limits do these ideologies have? What benefits do the labels provide?
4. How can you live the gospel more fully in your vocation?

Acts of God or Acts of Man? (1986)

1. In the words of Skillen ". . . the poor suffer much more than the rich all over the world, with the poorer countries suffering more than the rich countries." Relief efforts in sub-Saharan Africa and other countries focus on relieving the poor. Are such relief efforts effective? Why or why not?
2. Consider Skillen's example of the canal latrine in Indonesia. Assuming the Indonesian people know not to build a latrine that close to their homes, how does one approach a knowingly self-inflicted natural disaster? How does assistance respect personal responsibility and dignity? What is the end—that is, the ultimate purpose—of assistance in a case like this?
3. Should government be involved in relief work? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. So what can you do in your own sphere to prevent or relieve natural disaster?

Suggested Reading: *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, by Marvin Olasky; *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*, by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett.

The Gift of Administration (1988)

1. A substantial part of administering with humility is recognizing the purpose of your administration. What is the telos of the Christian lawyer? How can he or she administer law with humility?
2. What place does the contemplative life have in the life of the modern administrator or professional?
3. Are you a good administrator in your spheres of authority?
4. How can you better practice humble redemption as an administrator?

Toward Political Maturity (1989)

1. Skillen says, “But don’t we need more than a multitude of issue groups when it comes to fulfilling our civic responsibility --- that of guarding and enhancing the public trust?” How can we go about building public trust? Where does it begin? What is it that we DO need?
2. What does Skillen mean by “get[ing] serious about public life”?
3. In light of the current splintering among Christians (Sojourner leftists, Tea Party, Ron Paul “Revolutionaries,” social-issue Republicans, social-justice Democrats), what can be done to move toward common ground and common principles based on Scripture and our common faith?
4. What role does the Christian lawyer play in the development of Protestant-Catholic principles of justice?

Will Politics Turn to God? (1990)

1. Skillen argues, with Tinder, that people cannot be good without God. Is Skillen speaking of a “god” or the God whom we know through Jesus Christ our mediator? Does this distinction matter to our view of politics?
2. Since human reason and autonomy have failed to give us a “good” Western world, where should we turn to find true justice, fulfilling stewardship, and ethical social responsibility? How do we do it in a pluralistic world?
3. In a world that is run increasingly by non-Westerners (Muslims, Chinese, etc), how can Christians unify to engage their views of justice?
4. What would it look like for politics to turn to God?

Suggested Reading: *The City of God*, by Augustine of Hippo; *Politics for Christians*, by Francis Beckwith.

The Expansion of Our Shrinking Globe (1991)

1. How is our gradual regression in world power affected our nation? Are we continuing to pursue our cultural illiteracy and “me-first-isms”?
2. Is there a place where missionary effort and politics intersect?
3. Without involvement in the “shrinking globe,” have we allowed Christian missionary efforts to fall short because we have not encouraged a full integration of Christianity and worldview in those we evangelize?
4. Skillen concludes: “God’s Kingdom is coming not through American leadership anymore than it is coming through Israeli leadership. It is coming by way of the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of people in every nation, in every corner of the globe. God is shrinking the world so we can see more clearly its simple unity under His dominion; He claims it all.” Is Skillen right? Why? What difference does it make?

Listed Articles

Toward Paralysis or a New Vitality

Study Questions Forthcoming

Law, Politics, and Society: A Special Challenge for Christians (1985)

1. In general, what does it look like when law is connected to a transcendent source? Aren’t laws simply rules to keep people from harming one another (i.e. don’t drive on the left side of the road, etc)?
2. In the 27 years since this essay was written, have we made any strides toward reconnecting life and law to its transcendent source?
3. Does this article imply any limits on our involvement in international conflicts?
4. Practically speaking, how can you promote a *high* view of law, life, and government through your vocation?

Suggested Reading: *Redeeming Law: Christian Calling and the Legal Profession*, by Michael P. Schutt; *Is Higher Law Common Law?*, by Jeffrey A. Brauch.

Schools, Religion, and Fairness: An Opinion about the Supreme Court's Opinions (1985)

1. Is the close rule of the courts over what is “religious” in education as described by Skillen a part of larger societal misunderstanding of the “relationships among schools, families, religion, and government”?
2. Is this understanding consistent with the Constitution? Biblical Christianity?
3. In light of the current educational debates, what can we as Christian lawyers add to the discussion?
4. What is the first step in breaking—or reforming—the government monopoly on education? Is it social, legal, political? Where does the change start?

Suggested Reading: *Calvinism and Politics*, by Abraham Kuyper; *Separating School and State*, by Sheldon Richman.

A Bicentennial to Open Our Eyes to the World (1987)

1. Is political representation a human right? Why is it important?
2. Are there certain underlying social ingredients necessary to make a constitutional democracy a just institution? Do we still have these elements?
3. If we do have these social ingredients, how can we preserve them? If we lack the necessary ingredients, how can we find them?
4. What place does the Christian lawyer have in this debate? What can he or she add?

Justice for Education (1987)

1. What is the purpose or end of education?
2. Does the government have a constitutional or jurisdictional duty to provide that education?
3. What is the role of the family in education? What is the role of the church? How do these roles relate to the role of the government or state?
4. Does the pluralistic model of education actually solve the problems Skillen believes it will? Are there any concerns with giving education over to the “locals”?
5. Practically speaking, what can the Christian lawyer do to support equitable education?

Lame Ducks, Paper Tigers and Real Power (1988)

1. How should we evaluate the candidates hoping to take on power? Share the criteria that you use when evaluating political candidates.
2. Skillen says “We should think more about how power should be used properly and less about who has it.” The current political debates and media coverage show that this tide has not turned, even two decades later. Is it possible for this to change in light of the media’s manner of reporting?
3. Furthermore, what would need to happen to change our view of power?
4. Is there hope in this area for America? Do we see any current trends that show a shift in mentality as to “how power should be used properly”?

What is a Monument to Justice (1989)

1. Why do we create monuments and memorials? What purpose do they serve?
2. Do we need to change our perspective on monuments? Why?
3. Ms. Smith’s is protesting the use of 8.8 million dollars on a commercial, money-maker monument. What would a proper monument to Dr. King look like?
4. Is Skillen’s idea to use the monument money to fund a soup kitchen a proper *monument* to Dr. King? Why or why not?

Is Government Dead (1990)

1. Is the current debt “crisis” a part of a common disagreement about the nature of the “public good, the commonwealth, and public justice”? What other current issues are wrapped up in our unspoken disagreements about the “public good.”
2. What will it look like for Americans to re-engage and begin the work of reform?
3. Is *reform* possible in a constitutional Republic (or will we eventually resort to reconstruction)? How so?
4. What is the role of a Christian lawyer in this complex issue? How can a proper view of law and justice touch off change in America? Are lawyers relevant to this issue?

Can Nations be Reconciled? (1990)

1. In a world where we see daily injustice around the globe and at home, is it wise to limit the role of the state? Why or why not? How can we limit our own power and the power of the state and still pursue justice?
2. Is there even a possibility of “international justice,” given the sovereignty of nations? Can nations enforce “justice” internationally?
3. Are there trends in current American policy that hint at any self-limitation?
4. How can the Christian tradition’s view of justice help frame this discussion and motivate the pursuit of justice in a self-limiting way?

Suggested Reading: *Who Wields International Justice?* by James W. Skillen (1990)

Who Wields International Justice? (1990)

1. Because of international diversity in religion, social standards, and government structure, is there such a thing as international justice that can be held as a standard for all?
2. How do we distinguish between justice and interests?
3. Who adjudicates in cases of competing interests?
4. How can our nation uphold justice without getting involved in every little international disagreement? What principles will guide our governors? The courts?

Further Reading: *Tower of Babel* by Dore Gold

We’re Facing a Political Crisis (1990)

1. Skillen offers an interesting interpretation of the political crisis of the early 90s, pointing out that budgetary problems aren’t that big of a deal if politicians offered the people genuine alternatives instead of pushing blame and talking big. Is Skillen’s assessment accurate? Do we see anything like this today?
2. Has Skillen’s assessment proven true in America with the current debt crisis and both parties’ failure to offer real solutions? Is it true today?
3. As Americans we tend to turn to “ingenuity, money, technology or good old American willpower” to solve problems. If this isn’t the answer, what is? Is there anything wrong with this quartet?
4. What place does the Christian lawyer have in fixing our “fractured political system”? How?

The Poor are Still with Us

1. American evangelicals often mix their terms equating capitalism and generosity, is this terminological equalization accurate? Why or why not? Why do we do this?
2. What Christian principles affirm and condemn capitalism?
3. Are current debt “issues” a sign that our Christian beliefs are not sufficient or that our belief in capitalism has failed us? Why do the poor still suffer in this rich country?
4. What role does law play in this debate? What role does charity play?
5. Can the state do charity? Why or why not?