

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE



STOTT-BEDIAKO FORUM 2022

JESUS AND EMPIRE:

Christian Witness in the Context of Power

As part of this year's Stott-Bediako Forum, we invite you into a process of dialogue and reflection.

This guide is meant to be used in small groups, so you can gather with other forum attendees or use it with the people that you meet with regularly.

While it is not necessary that you be a forum participant to use this guide, we especially recommend it for those who will be joining us for the forum, so that you can begin to think about the forum topics, raise questions, locate your own experience, and learn from others. You may go through the sections one-by-one or pick-and-choose those that seem most interesting and generative for you.

We look forward to exploring together the theme, *Jesus and Empire: Christian Witness in the Context of Power*. Welcome!

INFEMIT



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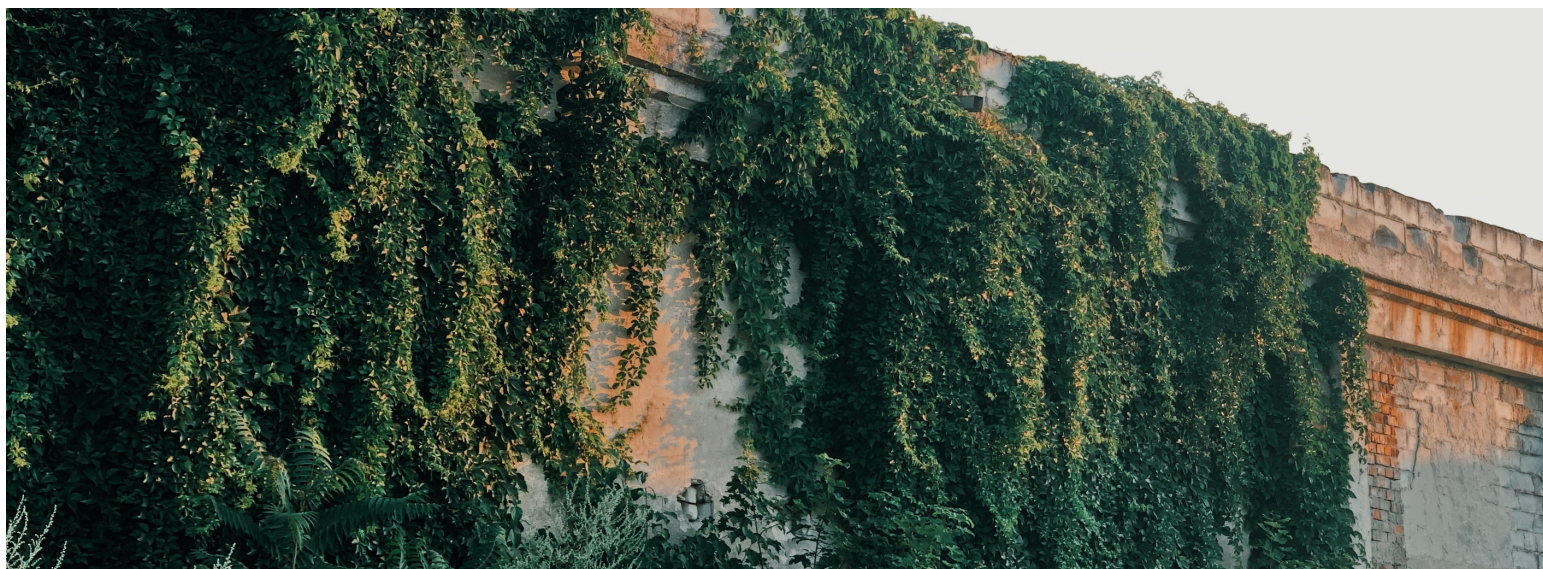
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EARLY CHRISTIANITY + POWER

Tony Deik



Early Christians practiced a radical form of social justice that distinguished between people only on the basis of their need. In other words, early Christians privileged the weaker members of society: the poor, the needy, and the marginalized.

TONY DEIK

PROMPT

During the Stott-Bediako Forum, Tony Deik will explore how the early church handled power, both among its members and in the face of the Roman empire. As Tony shares, the majority of New Testament scholars has seen the New Testament as being intentionally silent on political issues of the day. Paul, for instance, has long been interpreted as promoting unquestioning obedience to political powers - and even Luke is often seen as demonstrating how Christianity can live within the Roman empire in peace and harmony without affecting Rome's status quo. Tony and others today question such views, understanding, rather, that the witness of the early church is highly political. In other words, early Christians did not only seek to change the individual's heart, but also to impact and transform the wider Roman polis. And they did that, "as rightly argued by Kevin Roe of Duke University, by offering an alternative way of being and living that runs counter to the sociopolitical patterns and structures of the Roman empire." (Tony Deik)

What arguments do you hear in Christian circles about how the Church should relate to political power?

As a group, read Acts 2, focusing on 2:42-47, and Acts 4:32-35, then discuss some of the following questions.

QUESTIONS

- What do you notice about how the early Christian movement relates to the empire and powers of their time?
- How have you heard these passages interpreted in your own contexts?
- What other Biblical passages come to mind with regards to how Christ followers are taught to relate to power? Share examples with one another of how churches in your context frequently interpret those passages.
- What aspects of the church in these passages in Acts challenge you? What might be some implications for the life of the Church today?

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LANGUAGE + POWER

Bishop Zac Niringiye



Language is central to who we are, where we are, how we understand the world, and our location in it. But language is more powerful than just being descriptive - it creates reality. So reality as we experience it is experienced through language. But the way in which we express our experience of the world is also in language.

BISHOP ZAC NIRINGIYE

PROMPT

Watch the linked video here: [Bishop Zac Niringiye on Language and Power.](#)

Bishop Zac highlights how some "European mother tongues seem to have taken precedence in describing what the Christian faith is all about," linking this to the historical experiences of empire and colonialism. He then challenges us to trace the realities of empire that have shaped us and continue to shape us to this day.

As a group, we invite you to brainstorm together. What words come to mind as heavily linked to forms of Christianity that are at the center of power (Zac suggests the word "mission," for example)? What words from your mother tongue or cultural context might be helpful in generating a more faithful Christian imaginary?

You might consider using a [Jamboard](#) or a piece of paper to write down the words you come up with. Try linking words that are related on the page to identify themes that emerge.

Finally, discuss the question posed by Zac: How has your experience of power (be it political, economic, or otherwise) shaped reality in your context: your collective memory, your vision of the future, and how the gospel is understood?

OTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are some concepts that you expect will come up frequently in the forum discussions, and how are you using them (for example, "empire")? Have different members of the group share to see if there are important differences that might be helpful to keep in mind.
- What questions or experiences from your particular context and language are you hoping to interrogate as you engage in the Stott-Bediako Forum?

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GENDER + POWER

Seblewengel

PROMPT

Watch the linked video here: [Seble Daniel on Gender and Power](#).

Seble notes that the structures within which we live tend to control us, whether we are conscious of it or not, and they often become internalized in our thinking and practices. She invites us to “do an honest introspection starting from our own convictions and ways of thinking.” She continues, “It’s easier to look out and find faults elsewhere, but I think it’s important to start from our own ways of doing things, ways of thinking about things, and the ways in which we are affected by how power works... finding out the extent of our being affected and the extent of the limitations we have.”

Start by sharing some of the ways in which internalized structures affect how people live in your context, particularly with regard to gender, but also in other areas.

Have you found anything useful for raising awareness and changing practices within communities regarding some of these internalized structures?

What are some ways in which the Church in your context subverts and challenges some of the structures present in the wider culture?

SETTING THE TABLE

Seble also invites us to approach forum discussions as if we are coming to a table, ready to both give and receive. Share with the people in your group about the ways in which power and empire within your context have shaped your own identity and experiences. What are you bringing to the table?



Empire is about oppressive structures, sometimes we subscribe to it, but many times it is just the systems we live in... Starting from home, and then the church, and society, things that we don’t subscribe to, things that we are forced to live under.

SEBLE

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POLITICS + POWER

Martin Accad



I believe that our societies today are in desperate need for a proper political theology, whose framework will motivate followers of Christ everywhere to commit to the sort of public engagement that serves the causes of justice, peace, and freedom in all realms of social and environmental politics.

MARTIN ACCAD

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PROMPT

Watch the linked video here: [Politics and Power with Martin Accad](#).

Martin briefly describes his work with the "Change Movement" in Lebanon as he seeks to live out a faithful witness in his country's political context. You can explore his work in further detail at the [Action Research Associates website](#).

Martin invites us to "ask ourselves: what is our role in the coming years?" What would it mean for the Church in your context to "refuse to be irrelevant" and to live out its call to be subversive and faithful - to be salt, light, and a mustard seed? As Martin prompts, think about the most challenging things in your context. In your particular position and with your resources and abilities, how might you make yourself available to work for the transformation of those things? Share examples with your group.

OTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What examples or illustrations are helpful to you in thinking through what faithful witness looks like in the political sphere? Are there any Biblical stories or metaphors that come to mind?
- How do churches in your context view their role and responsibility with regard to social and political change?
- Can you share any examples of Christian communities or individuals participating transformatively in social and political change? What can be learned from those experiences?

WEALTH + POWER

Al Tizon



PROMPT

Al Tizon invites us to interrogate the economic systems that drive empire and the call for the church to live out a radical alternative. Take a few minutes to read together the following excerpt from Al's writing on this topic and **1 Timothy 6:6-19**, and then discuss the question below.

"Part of the formation of the alternative community of Jesus people—the church—included a way of viewing and using material and monetary resources, not as conduits through which one gets rich, but rather as means to ensure that all were taken care of, a community where no one had need... As such, part of the witness of the alternative community called the church was to say, in the context of Empire, that socio-economic justice is possible in Jesus Christ. This, of course, implies that the Empire was (and is) socio-economically unjust, filled with the cruel unevenness of wealth and poverty—the rich minority getting richer at the expense of the poor majority getting poorer. Socio-economic injustice was and is the natural consequence of the pursuit of wealth or the love of money. The alternate community of Jesus people was and is called to demonstrate another way. It was and is called to demonstrate power over the spirit of Mammon, which is essentially what drives the insatiable pursuit of wealth."

QUESTIONS

- How have you heard this passage in 1 Timothy interpreted in your context? What strikes you in the passage after reading Al's reflection on the topic?
- How is wealth commonly viewed, and what economic practices are promoted in churches in your context? Explore any practices that seem to promote socio-economic justice and others that contribute to systems of injustice.
- Can you describe some of the economic systems that seem to drive forms of Empire in our world today? How might the Church participate in subverting these forms of empire?



"The spirit behind the "love of money" is the spirit of Mammon, which I contend is the ultimate driver for manifestations of Empire throughout time. In fact, Empire—or The spirit of Mammon is the spirit of Empire; the power of Mammon is the power of Empire."

AL TIZON

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For registration and information, visit
www.infemit.org/sb2022/