



*Becoming a Pastor Theologian:  
New Possibilities for Church  
Leadership*

Available October 2016

\$25, x + 221 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-5171-3

*“So part of the pastor-as-political-theologian’s role is apocalyptic: to unveil and unmask the idolatrous pretensions of the polis that can be all too easily missed since they constitute the status quo wallpaper of our everyday environment.”*

## Politics and the Pulpit with James K. A. Smith

The first task of the pastor as political theologian is to serve congregations by being ethnographers of the rites of the empire that surround them, teaching them to read the rituals of late modern democracy through a biblical, theological lens. . . .

The political is not just the administration of law – as if political life boiled down to trash removal service and keeping the traffic lights operational. The political is not merely procedural; it is formative. The polis is a *koinonia* that is animated by a vision of the Good. And while Aristotle couldn’t imagine competing visions of the Good within the territory of the walled city, this reality of competing poleis and rival goods was something Christians appreciated from the beginning. There are rival poleis within the confines of the nation-state. The formative power of the polis is not embodied in its sword but in its rituals. In this respect, the reach of the polis’s vision of the good life is carried in all kinds of non-state rhythms and routines that reinforce, say, the *libido dominandi* of the earthly city, or the ultimate mythology of independence and autonomy that is not only articulated in a constitution but enshrined in a million micro-liturgies that reinforce our egoism.

So part of the pastor-as-political-theologian’s role is apocalyptic: to unveil and unmask the idolatrous pretensions of the polis that can be all too easily missed since they constitute the status quo wallpaper of our everyday environment. It requires thoughtful, rigorous, theological work to pierce through the everyday rituals we go through on autopilot and see them for what they are: ways we are lulled into paying homage to rival kings. This requires what Richard Bauckham calls a “purging of the Christian imagination.” At stake here is nothing less than true versus false *worship*.

So part of the pastor theologian’s *political* work is to enable the people of God to “read” the practices of the regnant polis, to exegete the liturgies of the earthly city in which we are immersed. This is an essentially local, contextualized task, both in time and space: the political idolatries that tempt us and threaten to deform us are localized. The political hubris of today is not the same as the political hubris of even eighty years ago, let alone of fifth-century Africa or sixteenth-century New England. Such cultural exegesis has to be local and contextual, but it also has to be theological – and, I might suggest, theologically *sociological*. If you want to deepen the theological capacity of the church, try offering a theological ethnography of Independence Day.

Again, we can find ancient exemplars of this. One standout is a sermon Augustine preached on New Year’s Day in 404, likely in Carthage, in which he offers a theological and cultural exegesis of the pagan festivals that would dominate the city that day. He takes as his text a line of Psalm 106 they’ve just sung: “Save us, Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may confess your holy name” (Ps 106:47). How do you know if you’re

INTERVARSITY PRESS

Visit [ivpress.com/media](http://ivpress.com/media)



**FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT THE INTERVARSITY PRESS PUBLICITY TEAM:**

Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or [awissman@ivpress.com](mailto:awissman@ivpress.com)

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or [kclayton@ivpress.com](mailto:kclayton@ivpress.com)

[ivpress.com/academic](http://ivpress.com/academic)



# BOOK EXCERPT

“gathered from among the nations,” Augustine asks? “If the festival of the nations which is taking place today in the joys of the world and the flesh, with the din of silly and disgraceful songs, with the celebration of this false feast day – if the things the Gentiles are doing today do not meet with your approval” – well, *then* you’re gathered from the nations.

But this isn’t just pietistic moralizing. Augustine launches into a theological and philosophical analysis of the rites of pagan feasts. At stake, he argues, is faith, hope and love:

If you believe, hope, and love, it doesn’t mean that you are immediately declared safe and sound and saved. It makes a difference, you see, what you believe, what you hope for, what you love. Nobody in fact can live any style of life without those three sentiments of the soul, of believing, hoping, loving. If you don’t believe what the nations believe, and don’t hope for what the nations hope for, and don’t love what the nations love, then you are gathered from among the nations. And don’t let your being physically mixed up with them alarm you, when there is such a wide separation of minds. What after all could be so widely separated as that they believe demons are gods, you on the other hand believe in the God who is the true God? . . . So if you believe something different from them, hope for something different, love something different, you should prove it by your life, demonstrate it by your actions. (Sermon 198.2)

The remainder of Augustine’s sermon is a sustained cultural exegesis that aims to make implicit the (pagan) faith, hope and love that is carried in the city’s feasts and rituals, which too many of his parishioners merely considered things to do rather than rites that do something to them. The burden of Augustine’s theological analysis is to highlight the incoherence of singing the psalm and participating in the festivals.

This is an ongoing task. One of the responsibilities of the pastor as political theologian, then, is to help the people of God read the festivals of their own polis – whether it be the annual militarized Thanksgiving festivals that feature gladiators from Dallas and Detroit or the rituals of mutual display and haughty purity that suffuse online regions of “social justice.” Our politics is never merely electoral. The polis doesn’t just rear to life on the first Tuesday of November. Elections are not liturgies; they are events. The politics of the earthly city is carried in a web of rituals strung between the occasional ballot box. Good political theology pierces through this, unveils it – not to help the people of God withdraw but in order to equip them to be sent into the thick of it. When we are centered in the formative rites of the city of God, Augustine reminds his hearers, “even if you go out and mix with them in general social intercourse . . . you will remain gathered from among the Gentiles, wherever you may actually be” (Sermon 198.7).

– Taken from chapter 2, “The Pastor Theologian as Political Theologian”