

# Introduction to Political Discipleship

Total Time: 16-26 min

## OPENING | 6 min

*Read the following aloud.*

Welcome to the InterVarsity leadership training on how to grow in our political discipleship and faithful civic engagement! In these five trainings, we'll be talking about what our discipleship could look like in the area of politics and civic engagement.

And as a reminder, here's what this is NOT:

- We are NOT telling anyone how to vote. We are NOT giving anyone a "Christian" voter's guide.
- We're also NOT avoiding this topic just because it's uncomfortable!
- And we do NOT expect everyone in our chapters to think alike or vote the same way.

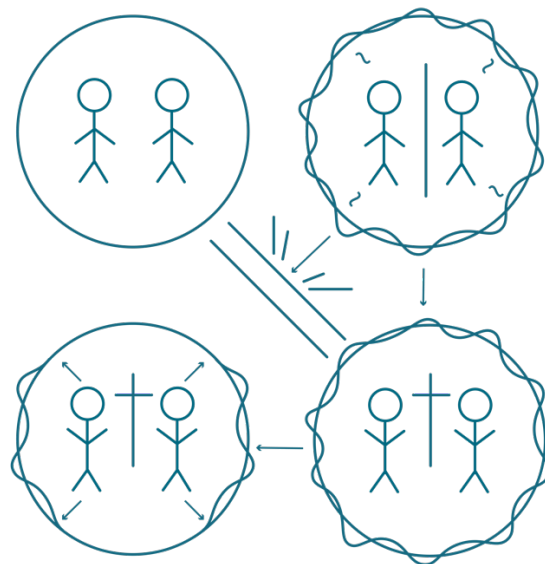
However, we DO believe that following Jesus extends into every area of life, and we want to have Scripture-informed conversations about what it might mean to follow Jesus in this area. When the disciples declared "Jesus is Lord," it was a political statement, not just a theological one. The coming of the Messiah was fused with political implications for the Jewish people and the Roman Empire, and this is also true for us in the United States. If the Gospel was good news to them, it is good news to us—including our politics.

The English word "politics" comes from the Greek word "polis," meaning "city-state." It refers to the way that people living in a large community (such as a city, state, or country) make decisions about power and resources. And since Jesus calls his followers to love our neighbors, obedience to Jesus will likely mean every Christian is involved in "politics"—broadly speaking—in one way or another. While words and actions must be contextualized, the question is *how* Jesus' people should be involved in politics, not only if we should engage at all.

So, every believer should be well-informed about what Jesus has to say about political discipleship and civic engagement. When we say well-informed, we are not saying that we decide what the "righteous" political positions are and then go to Scripture to justify our political platforms and preferences. We are explicitly saying the opposite. **It should**

be Scripture and the teachings of Jesus that inform our politics and shape our civic engagement. The goal is not to be right or to be self-righteous, but to orient our politics around the love of God, neighbor, and ourselves. We invite you to faithfully wrestle with what it means to steward our power and resources in ways that honor God and our neighbors.

## What is God's Good News About Politics?



In some Christian contexts, it is taught that the only fruit of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is victory over one's personal sin and eternal life in Heaven. In other Christian spaces, preaching and discipleship focus on the systemic and institutional renewal that Christ and the Kingdom of God promises, while ignoring personal obedience.

Fortunately, the Bible doesn't separate the two. Our personal and collective sin is met with both individual and institutional transformation. Praise God that Jesus came, died, and rose not only for our lives to be redeemed, but for our freedom from personal, relational, and systemic sin and brokenness. This includes civic and political structures that govern our everyday lives. Wherever there is brokenness and injustice, the kingdom of God came to make it right.

The English abolitionist William Wilberforce didn't just praise God for the forgiveness he found in Christ. He worked in politics to abolish the slave trade in the UK. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer didn't just use biblical allusions to

strengthen the argument for the rights for African Americans. They spoke in word and deed, and implored their partners to love their enemies, refuse to seek vengeance, and speak truth to power.

In InterVarsity, we use the Big Story Gospel Diagram as a visual representation of this holistic Christian gospel message. It consists of four key components:

1. **God's Design:** The top left circle of the diagram illustrates God's original plan for humanity, emphasizing that God created humans to be in a loving relationship with Him and to reflect His image. We were made in the image of God to flourish, work, steward, and create, living in blessed shalom with peace among all relationships. That is peace between humanity and God, peace with one another, peace within ourselves, and peace with creation.
2. **The Problem of Sin:** This top right circle illuminates humanity's rebellion against God and the personal, relational, and systemic brokenness that is a result. Due to our desire to live outside of what God intended, we see abuse, violence, jealousy, racism, and all sorts of addictions and afflictions. And this brokenness is not confined to individuals, but afflicts families, communities, and countries.
3. **Jesus' Solution:** The image on the bottom right proclaims that Jesus Christ is Messiah, Redeemer, and Liberator. He is the solution to the problem of sin. It portrays Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the means through which God reconciles humanity to Himself, offering forgiveness and restoration. But the Gospel story does not stop there but includes the coming of the Kingdom of God to renew all of creation. This includes all individuals, institutions, and every power and principality.
4. **Faithful Response:** The final part of the diagram is the personal and collective response to this radical love and justice. And that is faithful, loving obedience where the fruits of our repentance lead to flourishing communities where Christ comes close, and the Kingdom of God is reflected in the lives and environments of those around us. We have been healed and God has sent us out as ambassadors testifying to the same freedom and reflecting the same love and justice He has shown to us.

Often, there is a temptation to move from the 2<sup>nd</sup> circle to the 4<sup>th</sup> and skip Jesus altogether. But, as followers of Jesus that would mean we are working out of our own will, means, and preferences. As His witnesses, we are to be living testimonies to His love, freedom, and justice, and that is impossible to do unless we have encounters with Him and cultivate that relationship. This is an especially important point when we are approaching costly and contentious areas of life like politics and civic engagement

where brokenness, frustration, rage, anger, and fear are pervasive. Jesus shows us a better way.

## DISCUSSION | 5-10 min

*Break into pairs, small groups, or remain as a whole group depending on your context and discuss the following questions together.*

- What emotions came up for you as you consider the Gospel from this perspective?
- What are some of the political beliefs that you grew up hearing? Where did those beliefs come from (family, media, education, church, etc.)?
  - *Ex. I grew up in a household that didn't talk about politics. It was controversial and we swept a lot of things under the rug.*
  - *Ex. My pastor told us that we were pro-life and that's all that mattered. Christians could never be Democrats.*
  - *Ex. My family isn't from the United States, so I am still trying to figure out what I think about American politics because I was told to work hard and keep my head down.*
- In this discussion, we are arguing that Jesus cares deeply about our political and social engagement. So, on a scale from 1-10 (1 = not at all, 10 = absolutely), how much does your relationship with Jesus and Scripture have to do with your political beliefs? Why or why not?
- None of us follow Jesus perfectly or have all the answers, and we all have room to grow. So, on a scale from 1-10 (1 = not at all, 10 = absolutely), how open are you to changing your political beliefs?

## DEBRIEF | 5-10 min

*Once you are done with your discussion, answer the following questions:*

- What resonated with you?
- What is something that challenged you?
- What's one individual or communal step you would like to take next?

*Scan the QR code for more resources on God's Good News About Politics*



# The Three-Legged Stool: The Seat

Total Time: 9-14 min

OPENING | 2 min



*Read the following aloud.*

As we shared in Training 1, these sessions are an invitation to wrestle faithfully with the teachings of Scripture, not to confirm everything you already believe about politics or to convert you to what we believe. We are taking a broad look at how God calls His people to engage with issues of power, justice, and political organization and consider His invitation to faithful engagement in our time.

Our grounding image for this is a three-legged stool. In our image, the seat of the stool is where God rests. Jesus is Lord over all that we think, do, and feel. Our longing is for what we ponder in our minds, do with our hands, and feel in our hearts to be in line with His love, justice, and intended purposes in the world. Consider the following Scripture:

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSVue) says:

*<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.*

*19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

This passage is a powerful proclamation of the lordship of Jesus and the position of all individuals and institutions completely under Him. The diverse church at the bustling city of Colossae would hold the personal and social implications of the Gospel of Jesus together without question. This powerful word is no less significant for us.

### DISCUSSION | 5-10 min

*Break into pairs, small groups or remain as a whole group depending on your context and discuss the following questions together.*

- When you consider that Christ is Lord over all, not any country, nation, state, corporation, or government, what feelings and thoughts come up for you?
- What is encouraging and what is challenging about this message?
- When you think about local, state and national governments, what is the Good News of Jesus from this passage?

### PRAY | 2 min

*To close your time, read the words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-12 (NRSVue) and consider that Jesus' supremacy is over the White House, Congress, and every politician in our country and the world. Ask God where He wants to see His Kingdom come and His will be done in these institutions.*

"Our Father in heaven,  
may your name be revered as holy.  
May your kingdom come.  
May your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one."

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# The First Leg: Orthopathy (“Right Emotion”)

Total Time: 10-15 min

OPENING | 3 min



*Read the following aloud.*

In the last training, we introduced the image of a three-legged stool to be the grounding image to orient our political discipleship under Jesus. The seat of the stool is where our God resides, and we live the most abundant and fruitful lives under His love and sovereignty. Christ is supreme, and our allegiance is to Him.

This time we're discussing the first leg of our stool, which is our emotional and instinctual life, or *orthopathy*<sup>1</sup>. In this context, *orthopathy* means "right feelings," or having emotions that are aligned with God's heart. NYU Professor Jonathan Haidt argues that we process the world emotionally before we engage with it logically. From neurological research, scientists know that information and experiences go through the emotional centers of our brain before they reach the prefrontal cortex where logic resides. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to cultivate an emotional life that is intelligent and mature so that we can respond out of our deepest convictions, values, and beliefs, not our whims, wounds, fears, or preferences.

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<sup>1</sup> Runyon, T. (1998). *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*. Abingdon Press.

The Bible is full of places where God invites us to cultivate an emotional life that aligns with His vision of shalom—peace in all relationships. This divine intention encompasses both our individual lives and the institutions that govern society. One well-known passage that highlights a collective emotional intelligence and maturity aligned with the heart of God is the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are a set of teachings by Jesus in Matthew 5:3-12 (NRSVue) and part of the Sermon on the Mount. They describe the attitudes, instincts, and characteristics that are blessed by God and the rewards that He promises. Jesus says:

*Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who **mourn**, for they will be **comforted**.*

*Blessed are the **meek**, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst** for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the **merciful**, for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are **persecuted because of righteousness**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Looking at this passage, we can see that God is not necessarily blessing people for their beliefs or actions; instead, He blesses people for their attitudes, postures, and instincts that turn them towards love for Him, neighbors and themselves. Poverty in spirit points to an awareness of a need for God's abounding love and the Kingdom He promises to bring in all its fullness. Mourning requires a connection to self and others that is aware and willing to be engaged with our suffering and that of others. To be meek, merciful, and pure in heart necessitates an instinct towards humility and gentleness. And to hunger, thirst, and make peace implies that we are in touch with and willing to engage with conflict and our own desires and longings for a world more like His Kingdom.

## DISCUSSION | 5-10 min

*Break into pairs, small groups or remain as a whole group depending on your context and discuss the following questions together.*



- What did your family and faith community teach you about your feelings? How does it compare to the invitations from Jesus to feel in this passage?
- What feelings come up for you when you think about campaigns, debates, voting, and other parts of election cycles? Where do you feel yearning, desire peace, or want to mourn?
- Our feelings are often signals for what we value. As you reflect on your anger, sadness, joy, gladness, and other feelings, what do you believe is important to you when you consider politics and civic engagement?

### PRAY | 2 min

To close your time, consider the emotions, attitudes, and instincts that God blesses in the Beatitudes. Ask Him to shape your heart to be more aligned with His.

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on God's Good News About Politics*



# The Second Leg: Orthodoxy (“Right Belief”)

Total Time: 11-16 min

OPENING | 4 min



*Read the following aloud.*

In the last 3 trainings, we discussed God’s Good News about Politics and prayed for an obedient response to Jesus in the context of our political discipleship and civic engagement. We also reiterated our resistance to the temptation to worship at the altar of a particular party, platform, or politician. The image of the three-legged stool reminds us that Christ is on the throne and has authority over our emotional lives. With that in mind, the next leg is our thoughts, beliefs, and convictions or *orthodoxy*. Jesus is Lord over that, too.

In the United States, the dominant Christian culture places a greater emphasis on right belief and correct thinking and conformity over practical behaviors and emotional experiences. This demonstrates itself in churches where pain, injustice, and suffering are dismissed and minimized, especially in conversations about power. The #MeToo movement and its religious corollary, #ChurchToo, are infamous examples of this broken theology. For decades sexual abuse was covered up in many industries, and institutions did great harm to individuals to preserve power and influence. Contrary to that, the Jesus of Scripture as we are learning, holds feelings *and* beliefs *and* our third leg, actions (*orthopraxy*), in beautiful tension and with equal value. He does not ignore correct belief or intellectual rigor, but rather he puts it in its proper place.

We see this in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. In these passages, the religious leaders attempt to use intellectual arguments to trap Jesus. These religious leaders had aligned themselves with the occupying Roman forces. They used their social, political, and economic power to exploit and exclude those with less; and violently opposed those who challenged that system. In these instances, they questioned Jesus, but His arguments are superior, and He left the crowds in awe. After stumping the Pharisees and Sadducees, an expert in the law asked Jesus to choose one law out of the 623 laws in the Torah to be the greatest. Jesus says:

*<sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." - Mark 12:29-30 (NRSVue)*

God's word explains that they were astonished at His wisdom and no one else dared to question Him. In this and many other passages, Jesus uses His intellect to call those who claim to be His people towards a greater level of faith and faithfulness to God. We see this when Jesus defends healing the man with the withered hand in Mark 3 or a lame man in John 3. The fruit of Jesus' knowledge and wisdom is freedom and healing. In contrast, the religious and political leaders who are experts in the law and supremely educated used their minds to maintain the status quo and keep their hierarchy in place.

In our current media landscape, news, entertainment, education, opinion, advertisements, and theology all come to us simultaneously and are presented without distinction. Most of this content is designed to appeal to our emotions, rather than our intellect. We must use our minds not just to consume information but discern its meaning, truthfulness, and desired response.

There are many ways to apply this practically. We're using the acronym CASE.

- **Compare** the claims of Christian politicians and influencers to what Scripture says.
- **Avoid** straw-man arguments which use lies, oversimplification, or extremes to discredit or distort a claim.
- **Seek** wisdom and understanding by listening to the perspectives of friends of different backgrounds and social locations.
- **Evaluate** the potential biases or points of view of what we see and read.

As followers of Jesus, let us faithfully seek the truth in all spheres of life, but especially in politics.

### DISCUSSION | 5-10 min

*Break into pairs, small groups or remain as a whole group depending on your context and discuss the following questions together.*

- Reflect on the values your family, faith community, and culture have around education and knowledge. What patterns or narratives inform how you think today?
- How can we use our minds to evaluate the truthfulness of what we encounter in our chaotic news landscape?
- What would it look like for you to love the Lord with your mind and use your intellectual abilities to “love your neighbor as yourself”?

### PRAY | 2 min

Imagine for a moment that you are a religious leader in the crowd when Jesus is actively disrupting the cultural and social expectations. You may feel uncomfortable because of the conflict, in awe of His power and knowledge, joy because of the healing, or all of them at once! In James 1:5 (NRSVue) it says, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” Ask Jesus for knowledge and wisdom on how to engage the systems and structures of our day, with His love and justice at the center.

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# The Third Leg: Orthopraxy ("Right Action")

Total Time: 11-16 min

OPENING | 2 min



*Read the following aloud.*

Political discipleship and faithful civic engagement are vital components to our walks with God. Cultivation of our hearts and minds to place our politics under Jesus is not a niche, accessory, or optional theology but is part of reflecting the kingdom of God. As we saw in Colossians 1, all kingdoms, powers, thrones, and governments are beneath Our Lord and Savior. The implications of this are boundless as we actively submit our feelings and thoughts to that loving abundance, particularly when it comes to the institutions that govern the world. This is especially true when we consider the last leg of our stool—*orthopraxy*.

*Orthopraxy* derived from the Greek means "correct practice" or "right action." It is often contrasted with *orthodoxy* ("right thinking") in dominant Christian culture. In Christ, we see that these are not in competition with one another but essential compliments to a full life with God. This is especially true when it comes to politics.

James 1:22-25 (NRSVue) says:

*"<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away,*

*immediately forget what they were like.<sup>25</sup> But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*

As James indicates, we don't want to just feel the right things, or just think the right things—we want to put them into practice! How to do this will vary, so it's worth discussing in our Christian communities.

### DISCUSSION | 5-10 min

*Break into pairs, small groups or remain as a whole group depending on your context and discuss the following questions together.*

- Reflect on your family, friends, and faith community. When you think of orthopathy (heart), orthodoxy (head), and orthopraxy (hands), which one do you think is most preferred in your context?
- As you consider orthopraxy—doing what God commands—what are some ways you might be able to live this out in the realm of civic engagement?
- What barriers might arise for you as you attempt to faithfully take right action in obedience to Jesus?

### PRAY | 2 min

Reflect on the words from this passage in James and spend time in silent prayer. Ask God to reveal the places within you where there is hypocrisy, inaction, or perhaps an over-reliance on action at the expense of thinking or feeling. Confess, individually and collectively, where you have fallen short and ask Our Messiah to save you and Our Rabbi to show you a better way.

### CONCLUSION | 2 min

## Closing Thought

*Read and reflect as a group on the following excerpt from C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters. This is an excerpt from a fictional "demon" Screwtape who is instructing his pupil Wormwood how to deceive a Christian in the realm of politics:*

*"Let him begin by treating Patriotism...as part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important. Then quietly and gradually, nurse him to the state at which the religion becomes*

*merely a part of the 'cause,' in which Christianity is valued chiefly because of the excellent arguments it can produce. Once he has made the world an end and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing.” -Screwtape Letters, Chapter 7*

This passage highlights what a profound temptation it is to use our faith in Christ to turn our personal opinions and preferences into core convictions and remake the world as we would have it to be. This posture places our thoughts, actions, and feelings over Christ and puts us on the judgment seat instead of Jesus, who has the supremacy. Jesus is Lord and we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, living an abundant life with Him; and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And this includes the systems and structures that govern our everyday lives. Through sincere engagement with Jesus as Lord over our individual and collective orthopathy, orthodoxy, and orthopraxy, we can wrestle faithfully with what it means to participate in the political processes of this world as citizens of nations and children of God with Christ as King.

*Thank you for completing these training sessions! We pray that the content and conversations encouraged you, challenged you, and brought you and your group closer to one another and Our Lord Jesus.*

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