

Starting Points

Total Time: 50-75 min

INTRODUCTION | 10 min

Introduce yourself! Please share your name, where you're from, and your major.

Opening Question: What brought you to a discussion about politics and faith?

As the leader, go first and share something light to set the tone. For example, "I came to this meeting because I was really hoping to make friends - and there's free food!"

Pray to Begin: Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer¹.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

STORY | 10 min

Same Faith, Different Starting Points

In this story, Andrew and Liz discovered that even though they shared the same faith, the starting points of their political perspectives were different. Let's read this story together.

Have someone read this story by InterVarsity Area Director Andrew Berg aloud.

It was spring of my freshman year, and I was sitting with my friends Molly and Liz in the student union building at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania. Molly and I were eagerly discussing our International Politics class, which emphasized the foreign policy perspective of Realism. This is a worldview that argues that intangible values like morality and justice are impossible to enforce in a chaotic world, so the nations with the most power are the ones who ultimately define reality. A Realist would say that regardless of what political leaders claim

¹ English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. www.englishtexts.org

about their intentions, all countries ultimately make foreign policy decisions based on their own selfish interests.

To Molly and me, Realism seemed self-evident based on what we observed in the world. And as Christians who are called to live in this world, don't we need to adapt to the way the world actually works? We agreed that basing our politics on intangible spiritual values is not a winning strategy, especially when the opposition doesn't limit itself to playing by those rules!

But as Liz listened to us, she felt a deep contradiction in her soul. Liz was raised to believe that Christians are called to follow Jesus' teachings, even when doing so feels costly and unrealistic. Though I was also a believer and involved in the Christian fellowship with her, Liz could not see how my worldview could possibly mesh with hers. But rather than flipping out on us, or checking out of the conversation, Liz pressed in. Liz stayed engaged even when she was experiencing dissonance because of her commitment to Jesus and to her friends.

Over the years, I slowly experienced an ideological transformation as I had long conversations with friends like Molly and Liz. And now, twelve years later, Liz and I are happily married! We continue to learn and discuss what it looks like to be *in* this world but not *of* it, with one another, our friends, and community. But this was all possible because when the conversations got tough, we pressed in.

RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

Potential Examples:

- *"I felt apprehensive because so often friendships end because of political differences."*
 - *"I felt happy that they kept pressing in with respect for one another. That's refreshing to see – I didn't think it could be possible."*
 - *"I felt challenged in a good way because it has never occurred to me to ask these kinds of questions."*
2. Which starting point did you most resonate with and why? **Write down your answer at the top of your handout** and share it with the group if there is time.

If there is hesitation or reluctance, share that we all have starting points for our political perspectives, whether we realize it or not. If helpful, share some examples:

- *“I related to Andrew and Molly. Jesus’ teachings seem like great ideals to aim for, but you can’t live that way in the real world because you’d just be a doormat.”*
- *“I related to Liz. Even if it seems impossible, we need to apply Jesus’ teachings to all of life, accept the consequences, and trust God with whatever happens.”*
- *“I didn’t relate to either one because I’ve never thought about these things before.”*

SCRIPTURE STUDY | 25 min

In The Beginning

INTRODUCTION

This series asks us to consider what the Bible has to say about how we engage with politics. As we discuss starting points, today we look at the starting point of the Bible, Genesis 1 and the Prologue to the First Nations Version of the Bible. Let’s explore together what God’s starting point for humanity looks like. As you read this silently, **make notes in the second box on your handout**. What does this passage tell us about God? What do you notice about humanity in the passage?

PASSAGE: GENESIS 1:26-31 (NRSVue)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth and to

every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Leader reads: The following is an excerpt from the Prologue to *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (IVP):

"On the sixth day, Creator made the first man and woman and placed them in the Garden of Beauty and Harmony to be caretakers of the earth. On the seventh day the Great Spirit rested from his work of creation, not because he was tired but because he was finished. The Great Spirit blessed the seventh day and made it a holy day. So humankind was created to enter into his day of rest and remain in harmony with Creator and care for all of creation."

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. What are God's actions and qualities in this passage?
2. Make a list of statements made about the humans in this section.

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of humans being made in God's image and likeness?
2. Why would God give humans the responsibilities and authority described in this passage? How did he intend them to use it?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. We see here that for God, concepts like stewarding, growing, multiplying, and spreading across the Earth are "very good" things. As God's image-bearers, what would it look like if all humans showed up in the world with God's orientation to expressing and exerting authority in caring for all that He created? How does this compare to the ways that humans today demonstrate power, especially political power?
2. How would the world be different if we all viewed each other and ourselves as bearing the image of God (including those who disagree with me politically)?

CONCLUSION

God's desire for all of creation is to live in *shalom*—the Hebrew word that means peace, wholeness, prosperity, completeness, health and deliverance. Therefore, His starting point for the intersection of faith and politics is that we are made in His image to flourish, work, rule, and create individually and collectively. We reflect the Father, Son, and Spirit's *shalom* in and through our relationships because the flourishing of all

creation is interdependent. This impacts how we steward our power, influence, and authority. This is our starting point as followers of Jesus.

CHALLENGE

In our opening story, Andrew was willing to consider Liz's starting point and he gradually rethought his own. Liz was willing to stay in conversation and continue the friendship with Andrew and Molly, even though their viewpoints differed vastly from her own because of Jesus' teaching.

Using a "fist-to-five," how willing are you to stay in relationship with those who disagree with you and consider another point of view when it comes to faith and politics? (Fist = not at all. All fingers up = eager to listen respectfully and learn more.) Share those thoughts and feelings with someone from the group this week and listen to theirs as well.

CLOSING | 5 min

If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!

If not, wrap up the time by making sure to thank those who gathered for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time, and location for the next meeting.

Ex. "Thank you for joining in this conversation. Today we leaned into the idea that we all have starting points for our political frameworks. Next time (remind them of the date, time, and place) we'll continue the conversation and look at a different passage of Scripture. I hope you'll join us again—and feel free to bring friends. While these sessions are designed to build on one another, we'll always make sure newcomers can fully participate!

If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study. And if you'd like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes an excerpt from the book Twelve Lies that Hold America Captive and the Truth that Sets Us Free by one of InterVarsity's national leaders, Jonathan Walton. You may or may not agree with him, but as we learned in this session, it's good practice leaning in and challenging ourselves, and I think you'll find it interesting.

Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned."

Closing Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

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



BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 10-25 min

America's Seeds and the Spirit's Fruit

Introduce the text² and orient your group to the next section of your discussion. Beyond the Text is a space to discuss faithful civic engagement and political discipleship in our current context.

For example: "In the final portion of our meeting, we're going to read an excerpt from a book by Senior Resource Specialist with InterVarsity, Jonathan Walton. He shares his own reflections on how this passage from Genesis impacts his framework for a faithful civic engagement and political discipleship. Before we begin, I want to say that some of his words might feel extreme to you. For some, you might find him more conservative than you. Others might find him too liberal or progressive. My hope is that you will be open – like Liz was – to listening and engaging with his ideas. We'll have time to talk about it after."

The leader can read this section aloud OR invite folks to scan the QR code at the bottom of their handout to read along or on their own.

"Genesis 1:26-27 states that every human is made in God's image. The Genesis creation accounts also highlight humanity's mandate to flourish, work, rule, and create as caretakers of God's good world.

Unfortunately, that's often not what we see in America today. Instead of humans being treated as made in the image of God, throughout American history numerous groups of people have been oppressed and treated as less-than human. Instead of humans using their power to create flourishing on the Earth, we see people abusing their power, pursuing selfish gain, and polluting the environment.

Frequently, the United States is referred to as a Christian Nation. A more accurate description is that the United States is a nation based on what I am calling 'White American Folk Religion' – a race, class, gender and environmental hierarchy that prioritizes racially assigned White, wealthy, men – and the people who live according to this ideology. (By White, I do NOT mean White *people*, I mean the system created to claim that those of darker skin color are inherently inferior.)

² Adapted from [Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive: And the Truth That Sets Us Free](#) by Jonathan P. Walton Westmont: IVP, 2019, 16-20.

Allow me to define what I mean by White American Folk Religion. In the US, the formal designation of who is considered 'White' has included components of family, national background, and class. At its core, the concept of 'Whiteness' was created solely to subjugate one group of people and elevate the other and justify theft of people, land, and resources. Lastly, a Folk Religion is the common set of popular beliefs and practices under the guise of true religion but outside of the faith's official doctrines and practices.

White American Folk Religion or WAFR claims to be biblical Christianity. It is not. White American Folk Religion does not treat all people with God-given dignity, nor does it encourage all people to use their power to care for the Earth and others around them.

Instead of a God-given rhythm of healthy work and rest, most American institutions are based on what's known as the 'Protestant work ethic,' which emphasizes success through endless hard work, and thrift as a sign of salvation. Instead of a reliance on God and His abundance, this system links human worthiness to productivity. Activity, accumulation, and appearance to others became the measure of a person's worth in our society. Generations of people internalized this value system and passed it on to their children. And so it reigns to this day in the hearts of men and women, and in the institutions in which we operate and lead.

In White American Folk Religion, early American leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are moved from mere leaders to forefathers, as if to make all Americans their descendants. Instead of being made in the image of God, we live in the shadow of the images on Mount Rushmore. The men are elevated to mythical status. Our freedom then was not afforded by the blood of Jesus but by the blood of soldiers who took and defended our right to liberty as they defined it. Our Father is not Yahweh but a nonspecific Creator, and the Bible is replaced by the Constitution. Instead of the Ten Commandments, we have the first ten Amendments, known as the Bill of Rights. The law and our leaders, not the Messiah, will set us free because we look to politicians to deliver us. This narrative isn't just false, it's idolatrous; we center our identities on the accomplishments of humans, not God and His will for all creation. Claiming Christ while holding and acting on those beliefs compromises genuine witness to Jesus and is incompatible with allegiance to Him.

The roots of White American Folk Religion run deep, and few Christians are even aware of how far we've strayed from God's good plan. When we don't study the teachings of Jesus in community, it is very difficult to cultivate a mature relationship with God. Our starting points for approaching politics are often defined more by our family, culture and personal beliefs than the teachings of Jesus.

A good way to begin untangling the Good News of Jesus from the brokenness we see in our country is by carefully studying Scripture and comparing it to the systems around us. Let us each have a humble learning posture as we continue to study Scripture together.”

DISCUSS THE TEXT

After reading, invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect on the text. Ask the following questions as time permits:

1. White American Folk Religion may be a new term for you. Where does it resonate for you? Where do you still have questions?
2. Have you ever considered a contrast between White American Folk Religion and the teachings of the Bible? Where did you feel challenged or appreciative while listening or reading?
3. How would you describe the differences between how White American Folk Religion orders the world and how God orders creation in Genesis 1:26-31?

After your discussion is over, close in prayer and make sure to invite everyone back! See “Closing” for a script.