

Study Guide for the Select Learning  
American Protestant History Series

# **The American Protestant Experience**

## **A FREE MARKET FOR FAITH**

This study guide is written to help participants make connections between the events of history and the dynamics of today's church. In order to facilitate reflection and dialogue among the participants here are some processes to use:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double-check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide nametags and/or have participants introduce themselves before beginning the discussion. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing 'how things are done here' can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality the more comfortable people will feel.
- Use the opening and closing prayers provided or create your own.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly, you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. Many people have the impression that church history is dry and dusty but participants may discover there are some lively issues that still impact us today—and there may be differences of opinion.
- It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion—as history shows it is what we do with those differences that make the difference.
- If anything personal happens to be shared that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to speak outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, "That is very interesting; what do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

**Background for the leader:**

This series on the American Protestant Experience is intended to give the learners a greater understanding of the confusing and cluttered religious landscape of America. No other country in the world encompasses this kind of religious diversity. Although religious intolerance and even violence is a part of this history, the unique quality of the American experiment is that this country is an open religious marketplace. The founders could see the awaiting potential disaster if one particular brand of Christianity was established as the state religion. Thus, we have an amazing array of religious expressions in the U.S.

You will witness the major movements that shape the destiny of religious life.

These movements form around the major questions of faith, like head vs. heart, conversion as decision, the perfectibility of humans and society, how to read the Bible, the imminent return of Jesus, the restoration of the early church and the Christian's response to social ills. These questions are still in play and continue to cause rifts and divisions among American Christians.

This series focuses on the American Protestant experience because the Roman Catholic history is quite unique.

Many of the issues and conditions facing the Christian churches in America are still alive and relevant. Look for the birth of those questions and whether the current answers are still relevant. Without state support and now, increasingly, without cultural support, the churches in the US are struggling to find ways to compete, not just with each other, but with other forces such as consumerism, secularism and apathy.

**Preparation:**

The facilitator should provide for the class some historical information on your own congregation. If you are not aware of the history, ask your pastor to give or direct you to some history of the congregation. Older congregations often have histories that have been put together for special anniversary celebrations. Was your congregation founded by immigrants? If so, from what country or countries? What language was worship first held in? If the language spoken was not originally English, when did the switch to English happen? Or maybe you belong to a current immigrant church and currently worship in another language besides English. Younger churches will have been started by American church bodies, and sometimes a larger church plants a new start. What church body founded your congregation? Provide a short verbal or written synopsis for your class about the congregation's origin and history.

# **Session One: Setting the Stage**

## **The Reformation and the Enlightenment**

### **Welcome:**

This study on the American Protestant Experience traces many of the movements that shape American Christianity. Two major events in Europe, the Reformation and the Enlightenment, profoundly influence the way in which religion is viewed and practiced in this new land. This session will provide a critical foundation for understanding the unique American brands of Christianity.

### **Opening prayer:**

God of time and history, open new doors of understanding in our minds and hearts as we consider how the faith and stories of those who have gone before us impacts our lives today. Amen.

### **Opening conversation:**

(If the group is 12 or smaller, do this process as 1 group. If the class is larger divide into groups of 6 – 8 people.) Introduce yourself and name the denomination(s) you grew up in. How many congregations have you belonged to in your lifetime?

(Show video: Session One)

### **Synopsis:**

- The Reformation with its empowering of lay people shapes the American religious experiment
- The Enlightenment has a powerful influence on the founders
- Deism is not orthodox Christian theology
- Deism focuses on human happiness
- Enlightenment thinking is rationalism
- Jefferson's Bible edited out references to the supernatural

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What does the theology of vocation, each person's calling in the world, have to do with citizenship?
2. How does the Enlightenment emphasis on rationalism compare with your understanding of Christianity?
3. How is Deism expressed in the culture today?
4. Is human happiness a major tenet in your understanding of Christianity? What role does human happiness play in your congregation? In the broader Christian culture?
5. How has this session helped you understand the religious foundation of America?

**Closing prayer:**

We give you thanks for the learning and discussion we have shared this morning. Bless us as we go forth into your ever-changing world. Amen.

# Session Two: Escaping and Practicing Intolerance

## The Colonial Period

### **Welcome and introduction.**

This session introduces us to the Puritans who early on attempted to dominate the religious life in this new land. We'll also meet others who arrive with their own vision that didn't include the religion of the native population. In this session we will witness the beginnings of a free market for religion.

### **Opening prayer:**

Lord, people of faith have always had multiple ways of understanding and relating to You. Help us learn from both the mistakes and success of those who have gone before us. Amen.

### **Opening conversation:**

Divide into small groups of 2-4 people, preferably with people you don't know well. Take a few minutes and introduce yourself and share with each other whether there are immigrant stories in your family lore.

(Show Video: Session Two)

### **Synopsis:**

- The Puritans attempt to reform the Church of England
- The Puritans found some support but ultimately their reforms were soundly rejected
- Other settlers arrive with the hope that their faith would be the established one
- Indians were expected to become European to be fully accepted into society
- Muhlenberg arrives with a willingness to adapt to the new world reality

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What forms of Puritanism do you see in America today?
2. What forms of religious intolerance are still in play?
3. How do you envision American religious life today if a state church had been established?
4. If Indians were to be integrated into early American life, they had to become like white Europeans. Is the church any more welcoming today? How much is cultural conformity a part of our church culture?
5. Muhlenberg knew that the church in this country had to adapt to its culture. What new realities are facing the church today? How might the church need to adapt to these new realities?

### **Closing prayer:**

Renewed by learning and discussion send us forth with tolerance and hope. Amen.

# Session Three: Faith – A Matter of Choice

## The Great Awakening

### **Welcome and introduction:**

This session will examine the phenomenon of faith as choice. The First Great Awakening was a call to enliven faith with an emotional decision for God. This theme will return again and again.

### **Opening prayer:**

Gracious God, we give you thanks that we can gather today, to learn from the saints that have gone before us. May their deeply felt and passionately lived faith embolden us to do likewise. Amen.

### **Opening conversation:**

In groups of 2-4 introduce yourselves and share with each other what, if any, knowledge and/or experience you have with decision theology.

(Show video: Session Three)

### **Synopsis:**

- Religious faith took a back seat to taming the land
- New evangelists called for conversion of the heart
- George Whitefield was a tireless revivalist
- Pietists arrive with their brand of heart-felt faith

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. From what theological stream does your congregation come? Pietism or more formal state church origins?
2. How do you define conversion?
3. How do you experience head and heart in your faith life? Are they in opposition? Complimentary? Of changing importance depending on the topic or situation?
4. Pietism is often considered to be a form of works righteousness and judgmentalism. Is that true?
5. Pietists wanted their faith to make a difference in their life and lifestyle. How would you talk about that desire for your own life?
6. Have you ever been asked to make a decision for Jesus? What was your response?

### **Closing prayer:**

Lord, as we have witnessed in this session, the church has always wrestled with questions around what a life of faith should look like. May your grace break through to our minds and our hearts so that we may better be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

## **Session Four: America – A Christian Nation?**

### **Separation of Church and State**

#### **Welcome and introduction:**

In this session we will relive the questions that faced the country's founders. Should they establish a particular brand of Christianity as the state church with support and special privileges? We still struggle with this question. Is America a Christian nation?

#### **Opening prayer:**

God we give you thanks that we live in a nation where we are free to practice our faith. Help us to appreciate the uniqueness of the political and religious heritage of our country. Amen.

#### **Opening conversation:**

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Do you see patriotism linked to your faith in any way?

(Show Video: Session Four)

#### **Synopsis:**

- Many of the founders were not orthodox Christians
- Many different churches were vying for supremacy
- Framers of the constitution could see that the conflict might be intense
- Religion was protected but not given special powers

#### **Questions for discussion:**

1. How is the question of the division of church and state still being played out where you live?
2. The framers foresaw much potential conflict if a state church was created. What do you think of how their solution for avoiding that conflict has worked out?
3. If America was established as a Christian nation, how would other non-Christian groups operate?
4. Religious sectarian violence is everywhere in the world. How might the US model offer hope for living with religious diversity?

#### **Closing prayer:**

God, we give you thanks that your Spirit was at work in the multiple points of view of the framers of our constitution. Help us to live out our faith in love today, even with those whose faith or politics differ from ours. Amen.

# Session Five: A Stirring of the Soul

## The Second Great Awakening

### Welcome and Introduction:

This session introduces us to the Second Great Awakening. Once again, we see the effect of evangelistic fervor, this time in response to new immigrants and urbanization. The revivalists borrow some of the techniques from the earlier evangelists, but some link their message to the scourge of slavery.

### Opening prayer:

Lord of life, open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts as we begin this new session. May we learn from those who have walked before us in turbulent times. Amen.

### Opening conversation:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have you ever experienced hearing an evangelist or revivalist speak, asking for a decision? How did you respond? Why?

(Show Video: Session Five)

### Synopsis:

- There were waves of revivals
- Denominational lines were blurred with these revivals
- Some revivalists are also abolitionists
- Revivalists were often millennialists

### Questions for discussion:

1. What do you believe the connection is between increased immigration and urbanization and the need for the revivalist activity?
2. Why did the revivals blur the denominational lines?
3. How did the expected the imminent return of Christ play into the hands of the revivalists?
4. What are your impressions of the dominant concerns of Evangelicals today? What issues give you that impression? How did the abolitionist cause come into play with some people in this movement?

### Closing prayer:

God, send us forth renewed from this time of learning and discussion. If our curiosity has been stirred, may we follow up on it. If our compassion for the issues of our own day had been stirred, may we act on that. We thank you always for your Spirit's presence as we leave each other. Amen.



# Session Six: The Great Moral Questions

## Indian Decimation and Slavery

### Welcome and Introduction:

This session reminds us of a very painful chapter in American history. The original inhabitants of this land suffered enormous losses of land, resources, freedom and health. The loss of life is counted in the multiple millions. This country was built on the backs of African slaves who lived in deplorable conditions. Families were torn apart and many died an early death at sea or in brutal servitude. All the while, Christians were justifying their behavior theologically and biblically.

### Opening prayer:

God of mercy, today we consider a painful part of our history. May we trust enough in your mercy and love that we can be honest about our history and its consequences, even in our own lives. Amen.

### Opening conversation:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: How does your own ethnic/racial story fit into your religious experience? Have you ever considered that question? Do you know people with a different experience than yours? What makes it different?

(Show Video: Session Six)

### Synopsis:

- Manifest destiny or American exceptionalism is a religious concept
- Land is sacred to Native Americans and no one should own it
- Some Indians attempted to take on European ways to preserve their land
- The curse of Ham was used to justify the subjugation of both Indians and blacks
- The abolitionists argued against slavery on a biblical basis

### Questions for discussion:

1. How would you describe the civil religion of our time? Do you see signs of American exceptionalism at work today? If so, where and how do you see that?
2. Are there current unjust systems that use scripture for support? What are they? How would those supportive of that system describe it?
3. Do you think people who feel oppressed read scripture differently from those who don't? If so, what is the difference?
4. How do you see these two American original sins still being lived out today?

**Closing prayer:**

God, today our learning and discussion has named some hard things. Send us forth with renewed sight that all people are your people. Where there is privilege, may we share it. Where there is pain, may it be healed. Amen.

# Session Seven: The Marketplace Expands

## Unique American Religious Inventions

### Welcome and Introduction:

This session will introduce us to the amazing variety of new religious expressions that appear in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. America is an open market for spiritual innovation and new denominations and sects come into being.

### Opening prayer:

God, we give you thanks for being able to gather once again to learn and reflect. May the learning we share in today lead to meaningful conversation with others we meet at work and in our leisure time. Amen.

### Opening conversation:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have you had any experience with a newer sect or non-mainline denomination?

(Show Video: Session Seven)

### Synopsis:

- The Holiness movement promotes the idea of human perfectibility
- The Restoration movement wants to create unity and recreate the early church
- Black churches emerge because of the unique black experience
- Utopian movements try to create heaven on earth
- Millennial movements create a number of denominations, including the Adventists

### Questions for discussion:

1. How do you view the notion of human holiness and the perfectibility of humanity and society?
2. Anticipating the second coming of Christ was very popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How do Christians view that today? Do you have friends who talk about the 2nd coming? What is the conversation like?
3. Do you see the increasing diversity of religious expression as a threat to Christianity or an enlargement of the bandwidth of the faith?
4. How do you decide whether these newer religious expressions are Christian or not?

### Closing prayer:

Gracious God we give you thanks, that you like diversity. Your Spirit breaks through into history in many and various ways. We are not always comfortable with what is not familiar to us, but rejoice in your creative work in the church of the past and the present. Amen.

# Session Eight: The Response to Change

## Confronting Modernity

### **Welcome and Introduction:**

This session begins to take us into the modern era where the melting pot has many more ingredients. Increased immigration brings even more diversity. Early theological and social rifts widen during this period.

### **Opening prayer:**

God, we give you thanks for this time to learn and grow together. May our curiosity be opened as we continue to consider the story of Protestants in America and reflect together on how the past has shaped our present. Amen.

### **Opening conversation:**

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have you ever had a conversation with someone who is a fundamentalist? How would you characterize your dialogue?

(Show Video: Session Eight)

### **Synopsis:**

- The Enlightenment in Europe continues to develop while America focuses on establishing a life here
- Historical theology is imported to the US
- Fundamentalism sees this theology as a threat
- Pentecostalism grows out of the Holiness movement
- Pentecostalism spreads rapidly among working class people

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. How is Enlightenment thinking being challenged in today's culture? Is there a place for more than just 'rational' thinking? Are there other ways of knowing?
2. Is Fundamentalism at work in your congregation and community? In what ways?
3. Why is Pentecostalism so attractive? Have you ever attended a Pentecostal church? If so, what was the experience like?
4. Is Pentecostalism at odds with your theology? Explain, why or why not.

### **Closing prayer:**

From the early Christians in Corinth, to our neighbors down the street, your Spirit has been made manifest in many and various ways. We give You thanks for your love of diversity in us and in creation. Amen.

# Session Nine: Muddier Waters

## Diversity and Cooperation

### **Welcome and Introduction:**

This session documents the effects of two world wars and the Great Depression on the confidence of those who believe in human progress. Racism divides the country while new celebrity evangelists make their mark.

### **Opening prayer:**

Today we study history that is getting closer to our own time. You came in Christ 2,000 years ago and yet we still struggle with how to live graciously with one another. Lord help us to live with the tension of the 'already but not yet' of your Kingdom. Amen.

### **Opening conversation:**

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Have you worshipped in a church different from your own? How did it feel?

(Show Video: Session Nine)

### **Synopsis:**

- Jim Crow laws perpetuated the racial divide
- Evangelicalism emerges
- New evangelists perfect the art of the revival
- The Social Gospel movement attempts to connect the church to social issues
- Billy Graham becomes America's evangelist

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. Why is it often difficult for minority groups to find a place in mainline churches? Has that been your experience?
2. How is evangelicalism different from mainline theology?
3. What is the upside and downside to celebrity evangelists?
4. What does the word "evangelical" mean to you?

### **Closing prayer:**

Today we have learned about the church in the 20th century. Ironically, racism and evangelism both abounded. Help us to find our own ways to bear witness to You in the world. May that way include justice for all. Amen.

# Session Ten: Boom and Bust

## The End of Christendom in America

### Welcome and Introduction:

This session brings us from the two world wars, and the great depression through to the amazing growth of Christianity in America in the 40's and 50's to the chaos of the 60's and 70's. We will trace a number of social trends that are challenging the practice of Christian faith today.

### Opening prayer:

Today we will learn about recent church history in America and about some of our current challenges. God, be with us and may the learning and discussion we've shared these past 10 sessions help us claim hope in an often-confusing world. Amen.

### Opening conversation:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don't know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: Do you believe that the church is in demise in this country?

(Show Video: Session Ten)

### Synopsis:

- The world wars and the depression challenged the human progress movement
- The churches experience an unprecedented growth spurt
- Churches confront racial injustice and matters of peace and gender bias
- Global missions are reconfigured
- New thought movements emerge including the Prosperity Gospel
- The growth of apathy and the spiritual but not religious

### Questions for discussion:

1. Why did the churches grow in the 40s and 50s? If you are old enough to have experienced part of that time period, how do you look back on it? If that is not part of your history, how do you react to the descriptions you hear of that time in church life?
2. Why did the churches begin to lose members after that growth? How are those social forces similar or different from what we are experiencing today?
3. To what do you attribute the growth of the mega churches and the prosperity gospel? How would you describe the prosperity gospel? How do you react to its message?
4. Are you hopeful or pessimistic about the future of the church in America? Why?

### Closing prayer

Thank you Lord, for the learning journey we have been on together. May the many and various ways you have worked through the church in the past give us courage and confidence that your Spirit is with us as we look to the challenges of the future. Amen.