

PASTORAL TRAINING RESOURCES

CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA

Module 2: Christian Story

THEME: The first slide of the presentation states, “There is no nation on earth that can tell a story like the American story. It is easy to idealize it or to demonize it. There is plenty of evidence for both lines of argument. In either case, it is clear the story is unusual, and even unique. No nation has witnessed the emergence of a liberal democratic republic that has lasted so long and adapted so well, nor a religious environment, mostly Christian, that has contributed so clearly to the flourishing of the nation, often—but not always—in good ways.” Christianity has clearly played a role in the formation, growth, and success of the American experiment. That success, however, has tempted Christians and the church to assert control in a way that has undermined the very influence it has wanted to exercise.

BIBLICAL EXPLORATION: Read and reflect on the following biblical texts in light of what you learned about the evangelical tradition

- Jeremiah 29
- Isaiah 58
- Matthew 5-7
- Philemon
- I Peter 1-2
- Romans 13

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. How did religion itself drive Europeans to the shores of the New World and inform how they behaved once here? What was their attitude about the peoples and cultures they encountered? What voices challenged the popular narrative of superiority and exploitation? Which group in your mind best represented Christianity? Why?
2. What role did Christianity play during the colonial period? How did space (lots of acreage in the New World!), creativity, and the rhetoric of freedom contribute to the American experiment?
3. How did the Declaration of Independence reflect Christian values? How did the Constitution free Christians and the church to function in the United States differently from how they functioned in Europe? What risks did it pose? What opportunities did it provide?
4. What happened immediately after the Constitutional period to the Christian movement in America? How did that renewal and expansion shape the way Christianity functions in America?

5. What did Alexis de Tocqueville say about the role of Christianity in the new democratic republic? How did it differ from what he observed in France?
6. How can Christianity be the “first” political institution in America if it does not exercise any kind of official—or establishment—power? How did it exercise so much influence, though it was NOT established?
7. What old and new challenges—mostly internal—did the church face from 1850 to 1900? How did Christians and the church respond?
8. What kinds of external threats did Christianity face from 1914 through the Second World War? How did the church respond?
9. Why the decline of Christianity and Christian institutions toward the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century?
10. What opportunities does such decline provide?

APPLICATION TO CHURCH & MINISTRY:

1. Christianity in America has become highly politicized over the past few decades. Europe may be post-Christian, but America is not. Better to say it is *post-Christendom*. Christianity hangs on, and even prospers, by adapting to American culture, sometimes in unproductive ways. Americans excel, says NYT’s columnist Ross Douthat, in heresy. We adapt and compromise to maintain our position of cultural privilege and power.
2. How do you see Christianity suffering decline?
3. How is it adapting to this decline in unproductive ways?
4. How do you see this happening in your cultural setting? If there is unhealth, how would you describe it? How is it affecting your ministry?
5. Considering the OT command to seek the welfare of the city and the NT command to be salt, leaven, and light in the city, how can you set a course of ministry that challenges the ways Christians in America compromise (to maintain or secure privilege and power) and instead enables Christians to be salt, leaven, and light in your local communities? How can you call and equip your people to live as disciples?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American’s Church’s Complicity in Racism*

- Elesha Coffman, *Turning Points in American Church History: How Pivotal Events Shaped a Nation and a Faith*
- Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*