

The Rise and Fall of the American Christian Empire?
Study Guide Week One: The Origins of the Church in America
Pastor Dixon – April 2024

Overview

The first session of this four-week class covers the origins of the church in America from the late-seventeenth-century European background up to the Civil War. This is the broadest scope of any lesson in this series, and it will allow us to consider big questions. Why did Christianity in America take on a form so different than it had in England, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, etc? What roots were laid in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that seem to still affect our experience in the church today? What was the relationship between Christianity and major historical forces and events like slavery, the development of (small "r") republicanism, and the Revolutionary and Civil Wars? This wide-ranging introduction gives us the context we'll need to attempt more focused examinations of developments around the turn of the twentieth century and the middle of the twentieth century over the next two weeks before concluding with a survey of the church in our present age.

Key Quote

"Merely to enumerate the [thousand and one sects which divide the people of the United States] would be impossible, for they change everyday, appear, disappear, unite, separate, and evince nothing stable but their instability...Yet with all this liberty, there is no country in which the people are so religious as the United States."

-Achille Murat, *A Moral and Political Sketch of the United States of North America* (1833)

For Further Reflection:

1. What are the relative benefits of personal versus expert direction in matters of faith?
For a case in point: who should be allowed to interpret and teach scripture? Everyone?
Only those with "adequate training"?
2. What is gained and what is lost when the established (or state) church is dismantled?
3. How important is popular appeal when it comes to faith?

For Further Study:

Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (Updated Edition)

Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: the Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*

Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*