

# A Lesson on English



## Christianity in the USA: 18th to 21st Centuries by Sara Tusek

This is the third issue of ALOE in a series about the Christian history of the United States, beginning in the 15th century (long before there *was* a USA!) August '09 covers the first Christians: Roman Catholic settlers, soldiers and priests from Spain and France, along with Dutch Reformed and Anglican settlers. The September '09 issue deals with Christians in the colonial era and new nationhood of the USA: Lutherans, Anglicans, Pilgrims, Puritans, Friends, and the Freemasonry of the Founding Fathers. This issue covers the 18th to 21st centuries of Christianity in the USA.

### The 1st and 2nd Great Awakenings

The Great Awakenings were a time of significant religious expansion. The First Great Awakening (1730-1755) involved Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists, both whites and blacks, enslaved and free.

This intense religious activity, including conversions and rededications, resulted in an estimated 75-80% of the population of the USA become members of Christian churches.

But by 1780 the percentage of adult American who adhered to a church had slipped to 10-30%. The Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) revitalized the sleeping Christian church. The Methodists Baptists, and Presbyterians gained members; among the new denominations that were formed were the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### Liberal Christianity

In the post-World War I era (after 1920), liberalism was the faster-growing sector of the American church, as the practice of questioning the nearly universally accepted Christian orthodoxy began to be acceptable. In liberal theology, the Bible is not considered to be a compilation of factual statements about science, history and so on; instead, it is a collection of documents describing the human authors' beliefs and feelings about God at the time in which the person is writing, within a historic/cultural context.

Liberal Christian theologians do not claim to discover "truth propositions" in the Bible, but rather create religious models and concepts that reflect the class, gender, social, and political contexts from which they are written.

Liberal Christianity looks upon the Bible as a collection of narratives that explain, epitomize, or symbolize the essence and significance of Christian understanding., according to theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whose ideas were adopted by many liberal theologians.



Liberal wings of denominations were on the rise, and a considerable number of seminaries held and taught from a liberal perspective as well.

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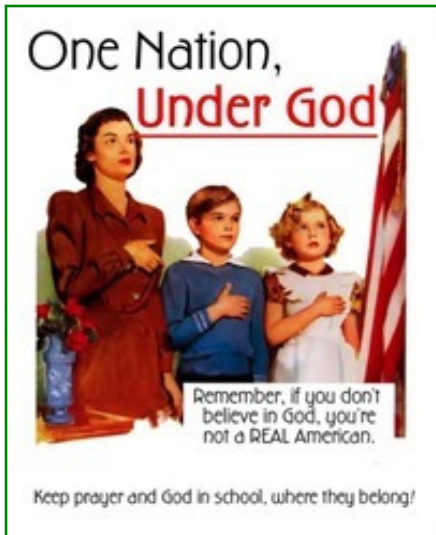
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Sara and Jarda Tusek at Blue Springs State Park, Florida

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A poster quoting the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. The phrase "under God" was added in 1954, in an era of fear of "Godless Communism."

## Our Christian Heritage—*from p. 1* 21st Century Christianity

### Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism: Conservative Christianity

Christian fundamentalism began as a movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the purpose of countering the influences of liberal Christian thought and of secular humanism in the greater society. Fundamentalists sought to define and codify the "fundamental" tenets, beliefs and practices that they considered necessary to maintain a Christian identity.

Fundamentalists opposed the liberal's critical approaches to the interpretation of the Bible and tried to block the inroads made into their churches by secular scientific assumptions, especially Darwinian evolution. Over time, the movement divided, with the label "Fundamentalist" being retained by the smaller and more hard-line groups. "Evangelical" has become the main identifier of the groups holding to the movement's more moderate ideas.

In the post-World War II era, the trend moved away from liberal Christianity back towards the conservative camp in America's seminaries and church structures. Fear of Communism, a climate of conformity, unwillingness to provide equal rights to all citizens and an inward focus on family life fit very well with Christian philosophies that emphasize conservative values and living an orderly life based on well-defined rules. Little emphasis was placed on any kind of meaningful social or political involvement; in fact, such involvement was often discouraged as being "unspiritual."

According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, Christianity is the largest religion in the United States, with 76% of the population identifying themselves as Christian. This percentage is impressively large, but is down from 86% in 1990. About 62% of the population are members of a church, meaning that 14% of those who call themselves Christians don't have the fellowship of a church.

Among those Christians affiliated with a formal church, the Protestant denominations taken as a whole account for 51.3%, while Roman Catholicism, at 23.9%, is the largest individual denomination. The survey categorizes white evangelicals, 26.3% of the population, as the country's largest religious cohort.

One apparent trend is ecumenism, a process of reconciling various Christian denominations and reuniting the Body of Christ. The World Council of Churches, founded in 1948 by Protestant and Orthodox churches, and similar national councils like the National Council of Churches in Australia which includes Roman Catholics, bring together Christians worldwide. Joint declarations and removing of excommunications have smoothed the path for ecumenical one-ness for the Christian Church. Ecumenism presents both a crisis and a challenge to the American Christian church, as it requires tolerance, compassion and an open mind from all Christians (this is the challenge) while being absolutely vital for the future of a respectable Christian church (this is the crisis, as a lack of unity presents a serious stumbling block for the credibility of Christianity in the USA.)