



The Intersection *of* CHURCH & STATE



SESSION THREE: Is America a Christian Nation?

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, it seems natural and reasonable that You would want the United States and every country on earth to be a Christian country. In this session teach us if that is true. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

- Do you think of America as a Christian nation? Why or why not?
- If God's main purpose for any country is to enforce law and order, protect the innocent and punish lawbreakers, what difference would it make if a country was Christian or not?

Watch the Video: Session 3

Is America a Christian Nation?

People have strong opinions on both sides of this question. Some cite the motto on our currency, "In God We Trust," and the words of our Pledge of Allegiance, "one Nation under God," to argue we are. Others argue those terms were incorporated much later in the Civil War and the 1950s. They appeal to the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli to argue that from the start we never considered ourselves a Christian nation: "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion"

- What pros and cons come out of America's freedom of religion?
- What do you think of President Obama's statement that America is a nation of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.?
- What are some of the most effective ways you have found to witness to neighbors who do not share the Christian faith?

- What do you think would happen if federal, state or local governments got involved in that witness?

In Jesus' day, Rome was fairly tolerant of different religions. It only set itself in opposition to those religions that attacked social values or Roman law. Paul never asked Roman officials to help spread the Christian faith, but as we will see in this reading, he wasn't afraid to use his Roman citizenship to open doors to share the Gospel. After he appealed to stand trial before Caesar, Paul was questioned by a Roman governor named Festus and the great grandson of Herod the Great, King Agrippa II.

Read Acts 26:1-3, 19-32.

- ¹ So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:
- ² "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews,
- ³ especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently."
- ¹⁹ "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,
- ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.
- ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.
- ²² To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:
- ²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, He would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."
- ²⁴ And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind."
- ²⁵ But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.
- ²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.
- ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."
- ²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"
- ²⁹ and Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."
- ³⁰ Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them.
- ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."
- ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

- What role did Paul wish for these Roman officials to fill, as he set out to share the faith?

- How could government authorities best assist religious groups in America?

Christian Mistaken Notions

Most of us may not realize it but the U.S. Supreme Court has often made rulings favorable to Christianity. Still, sometimes it's wiser to keep government separate from church affairs and not involve it in religious matters.

- What risks do we take when we seek government intervention on behalf of religion?
- In what ways would it be better to erect our Christmas manger scenes in our own yard and not fight for the right to have religious symbols displayed on the courthouse lawn?

Closing Prayer: Lord God, when Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," He distinguished between the spheres of church and state. Give us wisdom to recognize Your purposes for each, that we may live in quietness and share the story of Your Son's salvation in peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Digging Deeper: Additional links and resources available at lhm.org/ics.

[Learn about several court cases on the subject of church and state separation.](#)

