

What Kind of Christian?

**Evangelicalism, Christian Nationalism,
and Faith in Public Life**



Artwork: *What Kind of Christian?* (2025), digital art created for Nassau Presbyterian Church's Adult Education Series.

Linked-In Learning • Fall 2025

Study Guide

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Ways to Use this Guide

If you are leading or participating in a small group

- Begin by reading the introduction for its important orientation to the theme for this study.
- Leaders of small groups can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day.
- Participants can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance at least once and read as many of the sources suggested by Heath Carter as you can. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.

If you are unable to attend a small group

- Use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon during the week on the Nassau Church website or in worship on Sunday.
- Read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple.
- Gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about *What Kind of Christian? Evangelicalism, Christian Nationalism, and Faith in Public Life*, using this guide.
- Reflect on the text and discussion questions as a spiritual practice or discipline.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and answers to the question, “What kind of Christian?” May your faith increase even as you find courage to be in conversation with those who might answer this question differently from you. Be open to the mighty power of the Holy Spirit.

Carol A. Wehrheim, October 2025



Introduction

Fall 2025 finds Nassau Presbyterian Church once more ready for a linked-in educational series. Since this series was begun, adults and a group of children have explored such topics as "Women in the Old Testament", "Stories Jesus Told", "Wilderness Encounter", and "Called to the Impossible." We have been captivated and challenged by presentations in adult education and sermons on Sunday mornings exploring the same theme and biblical text.

This year our theme and biblical texts are both timely and important for Christians to think and talk about with other Christians. The topic, *What Kind of Christian? Evangelicalism, Christian Nationalism and Faith in Public Life* will be presented for the first four weeks of this five-session series by Heath Carter, history professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. The fifth session will be led by Lauren Herb Davis, who teaches systemic thinking in public policy. She will help us think about how to have respectful, honest conversations across political and theological divides, a necessary part of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ.

Each week Pastor David Davis will preach on a biblical text determined by, but not necessarily a "match" to, the theme of each week's presentation. Explorations of those texts are included in each small group plan.

As to the theme developed by Professor Carter, we will discover how from revival fires to culture wars, evangelical Christianity has shaped life in the United States in profound and contradictory ways. We will explore what we can learn from this history and what faithful Christian witness looks like today. This timely topic deserves our prayer and attention.

If you are unable to be present for the presentations on Sundays, the recording of the adult education presentations will be available by Monday afternoon on the Nassau Church website. Of course, the 9:15 service of worship is livestreamed and can be watched anytime during the week. Beginning this fall audio recordings of both sermons and adult education classes are also available as podcasts on Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, and Spotify: search for "Nassau Presbyterian Church" then follow or subscribe to be alerted when new recordings are uploaded.

Perhaps the times and places for the small groups don't fit with your schedule, but don't let that stop you from watching the sermon and listening to the adult education presentation. Use this guide to focus your own thinking on this theme. Pray for the leaders and the small groups who are digging into this theme.



WEEK ONE

The Christianity of This Land and the Christianity of Christ

The fires of revival swept across the United States in the early nineteenth century, transforming society everywhere they went. Nineteenth-century evangelicals were deeply ecumenical precisely because they were also relentless reformers who believed that the Kingdom of God was coming here on earth. Evangelical faith sparked radically egalitarian developments, even as it became intertwined with white supremacy. As first churches and then the nation broke apart amid rising conflict over slavery, the stakes seemed to many nothing short of cosmic. On the other side of the Civil War, the urgent moral question became the terms on which they would be sewn back together.

Beginning with the Bible

The church in Philippi received this letter from Paul while he was in prison, most likely in Rome although Paul was in prison in other places too. If in Rome, this is near the end of his ministry. The Philippian congregation consisted of gentiles and Paul is worried that they might be taken in by other teachers.

READ **PHILIPPIANS 3:10–21** ALOUD.

- What do you learn about Paul from this portion of Philippians?
- What is troubling him about the situation in Philippi and in the church there?
- One way to define “righteousness” as Paul uses the term is “living in a way that embodies God’s mercy and justice.” How do you interpret Paul’s words here using that definition?
- The words “perfect” and “perfected” jar contemporary ears. For Paul, this appears to mean “mature in faith and love” rather than doing everything right or following every letter of the law. With Paul’s definition in mind, how might you paraphrase these verses?

One commentator wrote that Paul was addressing three questions here:

- What do you want out of life?
- Whom do you want to be like?
- How open are you to being changed?

How do you think Paul approaches these questions and how would you answer each one?

What is the Christianity of this Land?

The nuance, and sometimes the entire meaning, of a word changes throughout history. Consider the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which became part of the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. These denominations are probably not what first comes to mind when “evangelical churches” is referenced today.

- What pops into your head when you hear “evangelical churches” or “evangelicalism”?
- How have you observed a change in the use and meaning of “evangelical”?

Read the paragraph at the beginning of this session.

- What hints at a definition of evangelicalism do you get from those few sentences?
- In *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Colored Lady*, Jarena Lee, born in 1783, describes her call from God to preach the gospel. When she went to see the Rev. Richard Allen, a leading speaker of the church who became the Bishop of African Methodists in America, she was told that “a woman preaching was against the bylaws of church government and discipline and it would bring into disrepute even the word of life.” Her plucky response was, “If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for the woman as well as the man?” Where does a story like this fit into the evangelicalism breaking forth in the nation during this period?
- In the appendix to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* published in 1845, Douglass rails against white Christianity, particularly white Christian Protestants. He writes, “We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members.” He is referring, of course, to the slave owners. He also wrote: “The [slave] dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity”, further indicting the church. He also noted that his words against religion are aimed at “the slaveholding religion of this land” and not at Christianity proper. How did the white church support slavery, in both the North and South?

- Think back over the discussion of the passage from Philippians and the discussion thus far in this section. With the cosmic disruption of the Civil War, what forces are there to bring the nation together when the war ends?
- How does this discussion today, on any level, connect with life in the church and in the world as you experience it today?

Continuing the Conversation

After this first meeting of your small group, your head may be spinning a bit from the discussion. Pause for a moment and consider these questions:

- What from Philippians 3:10–21 and our discussion do you want to ponder before the sermon on Sunday?
- As you recall the discussion based on Christianity prior to and after the Civil War, what do you want to ponder before you hear Professor Carter's presentation on Sunday? What questions do you have for him?



WEEK TWO

Social Gospels and Smaller Tents

In the early twentieth century evangelicals recommitted to “Christianizing the social order,” which entailed fighting for greater, if not perfect, equality. This project became a major pre-occupation of the leading evangelical organization of the age, the Federal Council of Churches (FCC). Some fundamentalists argued that the FCC was full of wolves in sheep’s clothing, but for all the talk of a 1920s great divorce between American Protestants, an ecumenical evangelical reform coalition grew in power through the height of the Great Depression and New Deal. But in the early 1940s a small group of conservative white clergymen gathered in St. Louis to begin constructing a smaller Protestant tent. Billy Graham’s sensational 1949 revival put the rest of the world on notice that these self-identifying “neo-evangelicals” were on the move.

Beginning with the Bible

Like the Philippian church, the church in Rome was built from the gentile population. Paul never visited the Christian congregation in Rome, unlike many of the churches to which he wrote. In our Bibles, Romans is found following the Book of Acts of the Apostles. At the end of Acts, Paul is imprisoned, under house arrest in Rome. While Paul hadn’t visited the church in Rome, he knew many of the Christians in that city.

READ ROMANS 12 ALOUD.

- As you heard Romans 12 read aloud, what parts caught your attention this time? Why do you suppose that happened? Something going on in the world today? Happening in your life at the moment? Something said before we began today?
- Some Bible translations keep verses 1–3 of Romans 12 together, while others separate the paragraphs after verse 2. How do the different division of the verses alter or reinforce the meaning of the opening of chapter 12?
- The Letter to the Romans is the longest letter in the New Testament and it has a myriad of topics. To get at those in chapter 12, look at how the rest of the chapter is divided into paragraphs in your Bible. If you were going to add headings for each paragraph, what might they be?
- The sermon title for Sunday is “Transformed Not Conformed”. One might expect the

preacher to focus on the first two or three verses of Romans 12. How does the content in the rest of this chapter assist in interpreting the first verses?

What Is the Christianity of this Land?

This week we move to the first half of the 20th century. The social gospel is moving into pockets of Christianity and in some places the gospel and the outside world are in conversation. There is a movement away from the piety of previous decades to an acknowledgement of the need to serve people in difficult places, not just saving their souls.

- Whether or not you have heard the term “social gospel” before, what does it mean to you?
- In the first chapter of Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianizing the Social Order*, he makes statements like these:
 - “The most august and powerful body in the nation, the Senate of the United States, had become a fortification of predatory interests...”
 - The “institutions of justice are today the chief props of social maladjustment...”
 - “The federal courts were filled with men satisfactory to politicians and big businessmen.”

How would writing like this support or rub against the world and church we encountered in the previous session, the years leading up to and after the Civil War?

- At the same time, scientific knowledge and understanding was remaking the world outside the church. J. Gresham Machen, a prominent spokesman for fundamentalism and one of the founders of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, railed against the liberalism of the day that accepted this new knowledge and used it to interpret the Bible in new ways. His goal in *Christianity and Liberalism* was to prove that everything liberal stands for and especially its attempt to reconcile with science is not Christianity but a different religion. Where have you encountered this type of thinking?

Read the paragraph at the beginning of this session aloud.

- Where do you find Rauschenbusch and his compatriots in that description? Where do you find Machen and his new denomination?
- How might Romans 12 enter into the conflict of this era?
- Near the end of the first half of the 20th century, Billy Graham came into prominence. He took the nation, and eventually much of the world, by storm with his crusades. In an appearance before ministers and laymen (and it was men) at Christ for Greater Los Angeles, a tent revival in 1949, he preached on Amos 4:12 and used it as a message to the church and world of that time. Read Amos 4:10–12. How do you imagine his message would have been received by the Rauschenbusch company of liberals? With Machen and other anti-liberalists?
- The title of this session is “Social Gospels and Smaller Tents”. Having talked about the materials provided, what do think this title means?

Continuing the Conversation

- Look over Romans 12:9–17. Which of these verses would you like to focus on the rest of this week?
- Recall the discussion about the theme for this session, note ways that it interacts with your day-to-day life during this week.
- What questions do you want to take to the adult education presentation on Sunday?



WEEK THREE

The Year(s) of the Evangelical

In the late 20th century, evangelicals emerged as a powerful cultural and political force. From pop culture to presidential politics, their influence was undeniable. How did this movement gain such prominence—and at what cost?

Beginning with the Bible

We move in this third week from two letters in the New Testament to the Gospel of Matthew. If you found that the paragraph divisions in your Bible included verse 13, the familiar verse about salt, you can probably see why it is not included in our discussion as the sermon title is “City on a Hill.” We will not be distracted by talk of saltiness in this conversation. Although Matthew is the first book of the New Testament, it is unlikely to be the oldest gospel since it draws on Mark, as does Luke.

READ MATTHEW 5:14–16 ALOUD.

- What might be the source of the metaphor “light” in these verses? To assist in considering this question, look at John 8:12, 1 John 1:9–11, Isaiah 42:6–7, and Psalm 4:6.
- Biblical scholars generally agree that the light that we bring is for the whole world, all creation, noting verse 14a. How does that change, alter, or support your image of the church, and of our congregation?
- You may have been told as a child not to brag. In Romans 12:16b we find “...don’t think that you’re better than anyone else” (CEB). How does that message fit with Matthew 5:16 for you or for our congregation?

What is the Christianity of this Land?

Read the paragraph at the beginning of this session aloud.

- What evidence have you seen of the growing influence of evangelicals?
- To what do you attribute this growth?

As we move from the first half of the 20th century and into the rest of that century, the meaning of “evangelical” and the nuances attached to it are changing. And the selections chosen by Professor Carter reveal that there are many sides to evangelicalism trying to get the attention of the world. From Tom Skinner, an African-American evangelist and chaplain to the Washington Redskins in the 70s and 80s, to Rachel Held Evans, an evangelical columnist who challenged the evangelical churches until she died an early death at 37, we see a wider swath of evangelicals than is generally found portrayed in the media today.

- In an address to Urbana 70, a conference of college students sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship held in Urbana, Illinois, home of the University of Illinois, Tom Skinner spoke on “Racism and World Evangelism”. In a speech that included quotes by Jesse Jackson and Dick Gregory, he declared that the social gospel is a force for the liberation of people. What could be behind such a statement from him?
- In a video featuring a 1980s PBS News Hour interview with the Rev. Jerry Falwell and Fr. Robert Drinan by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Falwell explains that the Moral Majority, a group he founded to reinforce family values important to evangelicals of his mind set, is against abortion, wants prayer in schools and condemns the resurgence of hate groups, but finally it all rests on belief in Christ. Drinan, a Jesuit and a member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts, posits that according to our Constitution and the rule of law, religious beliefs cannot be legislated for the entire population. What are the major difficulties facing any conversation between these two points of view then and now?
- Rachel Held Evans in “What Evangelical Means (and Doesn’t Mean) to Me” includes this list of what it doesn’t mean to her: allegiance to a political party; restricting roles of women in home or church; interpretation of an ancient Near Eastern creation account as science; absence of liturgy, sacrament, and tradition; individualism; certainty; opposing gay rights; Southern Baptist; unilateral support for Israel; lack of ecumenism; exclusivism; and exclusion. She wrote this blog in response to criticism of her columns and blogging, where she identified as evangelical. What do you think those criticisms were? What do you make of her response?

Continued on page 12

Reflections

Prayers

Continuing the Conversation

- Read Matthew 5:14–16 slowly a couple of times aloud, allowing these words to flow over you. What verse or phrase do you want to spend time with this week?
- Perhaps the discussion on the theme came close to home for you. As you read or listen to the news this week, what do you hear that carries forth an idea or theme from our discussion?
- As you think back over this session, what questions do you want to take to Heath Carter on Sunday?



WEEK FOUR

In the Ashes of Evangelical Empires

The events of the last decade have prompted fundamental reckonings with everything we thought we knew about evangelicals and democracy in the United States. As the nation approaches its 250th birthday, where are we now? And where do we go from here? What does faithfulness in the public square look like in these bewildering times?

Beginning with the Bible

We continue in the Gospels, moving from Matthew to Luke for this session. These are not unfamiliar verses to most Christians. Isn't it interesting that the compiler Luke chose to place these teachings after a disciple asked Jesus to teach them how to pray? Not content to supply the prayer with which Jesus answers, included here is why we are to pray.

READ LUKE 11:5–13 ALOUD.

- Why are we to pray, based on these verses?
- Why do you think this passage is the sermon text for Sunday? One hint is the sermon title, "A City on a Hill".
- These two brief parables about why we are to pray are found only in Luke. The examples may sound a bit strange to us, but hospitality was super important in a land and time when travelers relied on friends and friendly strangers to provide food and a place to sleep. With that information, how do you interpret verses 5–10?
- What is the heart of the argument for praying in verses 11–13?

What is the Christianity of this Land?

We have now plunged into the 20th century and thus close to contemporary time. That means we cannot avoid talking about the subtitle for this series: Evangelicalism, Christian Nationalism, and Faith in Public Life. We can no longer talk about "them", the evangelicals in the past or today with whom we might disagree; now we must be open to talking about "us" and our role in this conversation.

- The poem by Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," is both poignant and aspirational. The final two stanzas are printed below. What is your emotional reaction to these words? How do they inspire you? How does this poem give you hope? How are these words an antidote to Christian nationalism?
- The second suggested reading for this session is "A World That Might Yet Be" by Heath Carter. He wrote this after participating in the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday on Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. There he met Amelia Boynton Robinson, who was beaten unconscious on Bloody Sunday. Not as famous as the male leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, she began working to register voters 30 years before she marched on the Pettus Bridge. As Carter writes, "She kept doing the small faithful thing in front of her, living—in whatever modest way she could—into the promise of a better day coming." What does her life suggest about faith in the public life?

Continuing the Conversation

- How will you respond when there is a "knock at midnight"?
- In what ways might Amelia Boynton Robinson be a role model for you?
- What questions do you want to take to the adult education presentation on Sunday?

Let America Be America Again

by Langston Hughes

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!



WEEK FIVE

Conversations that Bridge Divides

The call to follow Jesus includes engaging one another in conversations with honesty, respect and courage. Throughout the Bible, we see Jesus taking part in challenging discussions, beginning in his youth. What is the biblical foundation for having these conversations? What practices might we apply to help us bridge political, theological, and ethical divides among Christians?

Beginning with the Bible

We continue in the Gospel of Luke. You will notice that this passage is not the sermon text for the coming Sunday. Next Sunday, Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, is the Rev. Lauren McFeater's last Sunday as our associate pastor. She will preach that day and has the option of choosing her sermon text. But Lauren Herb Davis provided a text for us to consider as we prepare to hear her presentation in adult education.

Before reading the text aloud, put yourself in the setting of a 1st century Middle Eastern banquet: Generally, women were not included as guests, but don't let that stop you from coming to the table, my female friends. The low tables are arranged in a U-shape. The best, more important, seats are at the middle of the U. A slave of the host might have gone around to the homes of the guests to let them know that the dinner was ready. The guests prepared by bathing, oiling their hair, and putting on perfume. As the guests arrived, a slave would have washed the dust off their feet. Rather than sitting in chairs, the guests reclined on benches. Slaves had easy access to serving each guest and table from the inside of the U. As a guest of the host Pharisee, where do you think Jesus is sitting?

- In 14:1, it says that the Pharisees "were watching him closely." What expressions might you see on their faces? What atmosphere might you feel in the room?

With this image in mind, mentally take your place at the table. Remember that you are a Pharisee, steeped in Jewish law and respected in the community.

READ LUKE 14:7–14 ALOUD.

- As a Pharisee, what was your reaction to Jesus' words?
- As the host, how might you have reacted?

Setting aside your place at the table, consider the content of Jesus' observations.

- If these two little stories are parables, they have additional meaning. What might that meaning be? (Remember that parables can have more than one interpretation.)
- How do these parables fit in with other material in the Gospel of Luke?
- In a commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock writes: "Taking the low seat because one is humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up is another." What do you think he means?

Beginning the Conversation

For four weeks we have examined the evangelicals as they existed at the founding of our nation and how they changed through the decades, especially before and after the Civil War. As we moved closer to the 21st century, the role and influence of a particular brand of evangelicalism grew substantially. Now the rubber hits the road. How do we cross the bridge that divides families, congregations, communities, denominations, and almost every civic setting? Lauren Herb Davis will focus on how that might be done in the adult education presentation on Sunday. Meanwhile, how can we prepare to hear her and how can we gain the courage necessary for these difficult conversations, wherever they may be?

- Where do you have these conversations? Are there some that you avoid? Why, and how?
- What keeps you from having these conversations?
- Are there times that are not appropriate for embarking on such conversations? What are they?
- Where do you find hope for such conversations?

Continuing the Conversation

- How can you apply any message you took from Luke 14:7–14 in your life this week?
- What sources of courage and hope will you look for this week?
- What questions do you have for this final presentation on Sunday?

Notes



NOTES FOR SMALL GROUPS LEADERS

The leader of a small group is not a teacher. A teacher would lead a Bible study. While one goal of our small groups is to increase knowledge about the church and the Bible, the primary goal is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple.

Review the group covenant on the back page of this study guide together at your first gathering. It is important that each one is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful small group experience. Invite the participants to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- Ask the opening question (see below).
- Prayer by the leader or a participant
- Read and discuss the questions in "Beginning with the Bible".
- Read and discuss the questions in "What Is the Christianity of this Land?"
- If there is time, discuss one or all of the questions in "Continuing the Conversation". At least, encourage the group to think about these questions during the coming week.
- Save at least five minutes to ask for prayer concerns and to pray together.

Opening Questions

To help the participants become better acquainted, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This time also helps the group make the transition from what has been occupying their minds to the small group discussion space. The questions below are suggestions; feel free to come up with your own.

Week 1

- Where were the foundations of your early faith formed?

Week 2

- What is your earliest memory of a conflict between religion and science?

Week 3

- What were some tidbits that you learned as a child about how to behave, such as “Haste makes waste” or “Finish what you begin”?

Week 4

- If you were in charge, what is one event or theme that you would include in a celebration of the 250th birthday of our nation?

Week 5

- What words, from the Bible or elsewhere, provide a sign of hope for you?

Give the group a moment to think about the question. You can set an example of the length of the answer by going first. Anyone may choose not to answer, but encourage each one to speak.

Continuing the Conversations

The questions for continuing the conversation at the end of each week can be discussed in the group or referred to them to think about at home. It is not necessary for everyone to respond to these questions every week. If you wish, invite comments on the questions for the previous week at the opening of the gathering.

Closing Prayers

You are encouraged to close the time together with prayer. Invite participants to offer joys or concerns during a time of prayer. You or a group member you have invited in advance can pray. If you wish to use them, here are suggestions for each week.

Week 1

- Pray for people who have endured dehumanizing treatment throughout our history and today.

Week 2

- Pray for people who have sought to transform our world to create a better world for all people throughout our history and today.

Week 3

- Pray for people who have been ostracized by their community when they criticized it throughout our history and today.

Week 4

- Pray for people who have stayed steadfast to taking steps, however small, to bring about a better world for all people throughout history and today.

Week 5

- Pray for the church today and each member as they seek to do what is necessary to bring shalom and reconciliation to their families, neighbors, congregations, communities, nations, and the world.

Leaders have often commented about how much they grew in faith by preparing for and leading the small groups. May you find this to be true and remember that the Spirit of God will be present in and among you. May you and each member of your small group come to new understandings of these difficult issues and think about and act on them providing a Christian witness to the world. Thank you for being a small group leader.

Group Covenant

- What happens in the group stays in the group. To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- Speak and make space for others to speak. Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- Stay with the group. Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option.
- Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- Focus on ideas, not the person. If you disagree, disagree with the speaker, but don't belittle the person.
- Speak from your own awareness. When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- Everyone in the group is a learner. In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.