



Founding Principles

The Biblical Foundations of American Government

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THE DEBATE OVER WHETHER AMERICA WAS FOUNDED ON BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES RAGES IN OUR DAY. A FURTHER DEBATE IS WHETHER CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS.

MANY WHO ENGAGE IN THESE DEBATES—ON BOTH SIDES—SOMETIMES DO NOT TAKE THE TIME OR MAKE THE EFFORT TO FULLY INVESTIGATE THE HISTORY OF THIS GREAT NATION. SOME CHRISTIANS TAKE IT FOR GRANTED THAT NEARLY EVERYONE IN THE FOUNDING ERA WAS A CHRISTIAN, BUT THAT IS TOO SIMPLISTIC. ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DIVIDE, THOSE ARGUING AGAINST BIBLICAL ROOTS AND CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT TRY TO CLASSIFY ALL THE FOUNDERS AS DEVOTEES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, SKEPTICAL OF ANYTHING CONNECTED TO ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN FAITH. BUT THEY VASTLY OVERSTATE THEIR CASE.

To find the truth, we must look at the history and the documents themselves. What becomes evident is that even though not everyone was a Christian, American society was built on the consensus that the Biblical worldview is Truth.¹

Models of Government Throughout History

Most history texts consider ancient Greece as the model for American government. Greece, they say, is the source of Western “democratic” institutions. The reality is that Greek government was man-centered, not God-centered. Greek city-states were selfish to the extreme and were unable to form any type of union. Within the cities, government sometimes degenerated into mob rule whenever a demagogue could whip up the emotions of the populace. The individual lacked value because he was not a being made in the image of an all-wise god. He was important only in relation to his city. If he offered something of value to the city, he was significant; if he did not, he was unimportant. The Greeks’ debased lifestyle shows the cheapness of human life in the society. Abortion, infanticide, and homosexuality were accepted. Although this may seem similar to modern America, it was not America’s foundation.

Rome considered itself the great civilizer. It emphasized the importance of law. Yet law was

considered manmade; there was no concept of an eternal law that was binding upon all men. Civil government granted all rights. If the government granted a right, the government could take it away. When Rome became an empire, representation was not part of its structure. Individuals in conquered provinces might be granted Roman citizenship, but they had no voice in how government operated.

The Christian Era of Government

Neither Greece nor Rome, therefore, laid the basis for American government. To find its true beginnings, one must look to the Christian era, starting with an examination of the Middle Ages. One can critique the Middle Ages for its theology and hierarchical structure, both in church and state, but there was a basic Christian foundation to government. Nearly everyone accepted certain truths: God's law was sovereign; the king was under God's law and civil law; a ruler could hold office only if he took an oath before God to keep the faith; and kingdoms might crumble, but God's law would always continue.

When the Reformation came along, the reformers did not repudiate basic beliefs about government, but they did add to them. They made a stronger case for the idea that rights come from God. They emphasized the Old Testament covenant theory of government and developed a theory of resistance to ungodly government. For example, Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*, written in the 1640s during the English Civil War, clearly enunciated the principle that a king should be under law, and that any king who disregarded that law could be lawfully, under God, resisted.

Most reformers did not accept the divine-right-of-kings theory, which said that the king had a direct grant from God to rule as he saw fit. If a king broke his covenant relationship with his people by endangering their rights, Christian citizens were duty-bound to disobey.

Reformation thought merged with English tradition as it passed into its American form. Both Englishmen and Americans looked to documents such as the Magna Carta (1215), the Petition of Right (1628), and the English Bill of Rights (1689) as reaffirmations of the Biblical basis for government.²

English Common Law also influenced American theories of government. The Common Law rested on traditional unwritten beliefs about right and wrong. A case would come before a judge who would then make a decision after consideration of precedent and traditional beliefs, most of which were founded upon the Bible. This was not pure precedent *divorced* from eternal law, but precedent united with eternal law.

America's Founding Documents

The Mayflower Compact, written by the Pilgrims in 1620, was the first American document of Christian self-government. The Pilgrims influenced the Puritans of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Two more foundational documents can be traced to these colonies.

The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, adopted in 1639, is considered the first American constitution. Rev. Thomas Hooker's sermon from Deut. 1:13, which stated, "Choose wise and discerning and experienced men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads," formed the cornerstone for this constitution.³

The Fundamental Orders begins by acknowledging that "the word of God requires that to maintain the peace and union of such a people there should be an orderly and decent government established according to God," partly "to maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the gospel of our Lord Jesus." It then speaks of the colonial legislature and says that if a law is not in effect to cover a situation that may arise, the government should judge "according to the rule of the word of God."

Massachusetts, in 1641, passed the Body of Liberties. This document is the first American bill of rights. A minister, Nathaniel Ward, was the author. Its preamble claims that civil liberties have their basis in Christianity. Ninety-eight "laws" comprise the Body of Liberties, all concerned with the potential tyranny of the government and the rights and privileges of citizens. Some issues addressed are illegal arrests, equality under the law, keeping property secure against government intrusions, freedom of speech and petition, and the right of lawsuit if other rights are abridged.

The basis of the Declaration of Independence was the "unalienable" rights given to men by their Creator. These rights were no longer properly being protected by government, so it was the duty of citizens to alter or abolish such government, and set up a new government that would take these responsibilities seriously.



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Founding Fathers on Faith and Government

“Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers.”

—John Jay, President of the Continental Congress, coauthor of *Federalist Papers*, and First Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, in a 1797 letter to Rev. Jedidiah Morse.

“God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the Gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

—Thomas Jefferson, principal author of the Declaration of Independence, in *Notes on Virginia*, 1782.

“The Christian religion is, above all the religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern times, the religion of wisdom, virtue, equity, and humanity.”

—John Adams, Chief Advocate for Declaration of Independence in Congress and Second President of the United States, in his Diary, July 1796.

“I have often expressed my sentiments, that every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.”

—George Washington, First President of the United States of America, in a letter to the General Committee of the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, May 1789.

“The rights of the colonists as Christians ... may be best understood by reading and carefully studying the institutes of the great Lawgiver and Head of the Christian Church, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament....”

—Samuel Adams, leader of the movement that became the American Revolution, in *Rights of the Colonists*, 1772.

“This is all the inheritance I give to my dear family. The religion of Christ will give them one which will make them rich indeed.”

—Patrick Henry, American attorney and great orator, who led opposition to the *Stamp Act of 1765*, wrote in his Will.

“God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.”

—John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister who signed the Declaration of Independence, in *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*, May 1776.

The United States Constitution

This brings us to the U.S. Constitution. One study of intellectual influences upon Americans during that time period reveals a potent fact; it states, “If we ask what book was most frequently cited by Americans during the founding era, the answer somewhat surprisingly is: the book of Deuteronomy.”⁴ This was due to the high number of sermons dealing with civil government. While some scholars may wish to exclude sermons as a source of political thinking, to do so would be to misunderstand the Founding Era. It was common for ministers to speak on political themes. There was no artificial separation between religious faith and government. Election sermons in New England, given right before general elections, always called the people to a consideration of righteous government, and urged them to give their votes to representatives who would carry out God’s will on earth.

The same study notes that the second most cited source were writers of the moderate Enlightenment, men such as John Locke and Montesquieu.⁵ While some question their Christian faith, there can be little argument as to the Biblical framework of their political thinking. Locke was a revolutionary writer, but only in the sense that he wrote against the divine right of kings in favor of representative government. Montesquieu was widely quoted by the founding fathers because he wrote eloquently of the necessity for balanced government through the separation of powers. In his *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu gives his philosophical presuppositions, which are consistent with Biblical principles:

God is related to the universe, as Creator and Preserver; the laws by which He created all things are those by which He preserves them. He acts according to these rules, because He knows them; He knows them, because He made them; and He made them, because they are in relation to His Wisdom and power.⁶

The Constitution also reveals that consistency. The preamble states the reasons for its establishment. First was the desire to form a more perfect union. The next three reasons were to establish justice, to ensure domestic tranquility, and to provide for the common defense. These are all Scriptural. Another reason was to promote the general welfare. Many in the twentieth century reinterpreted this to mean setting up a welfare state. Nothing could have been further from the minds of those who framed this document. The government was to maintain a climate of liberty that would benefit everyone. It was not a mandate to create a system that would help specific groups at the expense of everyone else.

The final reason was to secure liberty for the present and future generations. This shows that the Founders were not concerned just with their own well being, but that they wanted to create

a government that would stand the test of time, and continue to be beneficial to their children and their grandchildren.

Some states ratified the Constitution on the condition that a Bill of Rights would be added to it. Consequently, in 1791, the first 10 amendments were ratified and became known as the American Bill of Rights. The First Amendment is probably the most famous. Within it is the declaration that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Notice that this is a specific limitation on the power of Congress. There was to be no official national religion (Christianity must be based on voluntary unity and union); neither could the national government inhibit anyone from worshipping God according to the dictates of his conscience. This says nothing about what the states could do; it was directed at the national government only. The rest of the amendment provides for freedom of speech, of the press, for peaceable assembly, and for petition for redress of grievances.

The Lives of the Founders

Research into the lives of the Founders reveals that some were not Christian—for example, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were both Deists who believed in God but doubted the divinity of Christ—but that a whole host of other Founders were truly devout. These include: John Jay, who became the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and then president of the American Bible Society; Patrick Henry, the great American orator who led the opposition to the *Stamp Act of 1765*; Roger Sherman, who was a signer of both the Declaration and the Constitution; Elias Boudinot, who served as president of Congress during the 1780s; and John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister who also signed the Declaration, and who, as president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) helped educate a multitude of later officeholders, including President James Madison, 13 governors, three Supreme Court justices, 20 senators, and 33 congressmen.⁷

An Involved Faith

What does this mean for Christians today? The American heritage is built on a solid foundation of Biblical principles. Christians need not apologize for that or feel that we need to live in the shadows. God cares about how a society is governed. If Christians step aside, we will be complicit in society’s descent into degradation. Christians are called to be salt and light, and only by actively engaging society and helping to shape the policies under which we live can we hope to reverse the tide. We are watchmen, as the prophet Ezekiel said, and God will hold us accountable for how well we warned against danger. God also will reward us for our efforts to point others toward righteousness.



He expects us to be active in every area of society, including public policy.

Christians today should heed the words of the Reverend Jedidiah Morse, who said the following in an election sermon that he delivered in 1779:

The foundations which support the interests of Christianity, are also necessary to support a free and equal government like our own. . . . To the kindly influence of Christianity we owe that degree of civil freedom, and political and social happiness which mankind now enjoy. In proportion as the genuine effects of Christianity are diminished in any nation, either through unbelief, or the corruption of its doctrines, or the neglect of its institutions; in the same proportion will the people of that nation recede from the blessings of genuine freedom, and approximate the miseries of complete despotism. . . . Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all the blessings which flow from them, must fall with them.⁸ ❖

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Endnotes

1. This article is based on the following book: Snyder, K. Alan, *If the Foundations Are Destroyed: Biblical Foundations: Biblical Principals and Civil Government*, Principal Press (1994), Revised edition, as found at: <http://www.amazon.com/Foundations-Are-Destroyed-Principles-Government/dp/0963767801>
2. Helen Silving, “The Origins of the Magnae Cartae,” 3 *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 117 (1965). Prof. Silving concluded that the Magna Carta could be traced to Biblical origins.
3. Gilmore, Ben, “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut: January 1639,” Publisher’s Corner, 7/26/12: <http://publisherscorner.nordskogpublishing.com/2012/06/fundamental-orders-of-connecticut.html>
4. Donald S. Lutz, “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought,” *The American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 192.
5. Ibid.
6. Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Book One, “Of Laws in General” (1748)
7. John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution: The Faith of Our Founding Fathers*, Baker Academic (1995).
8. Rev. Jedidiah Morse, *Election Sermon*, 25 April 1799 (Charlestown, MA, 1799)