

# The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

*Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.*

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends? Perhaps carols, cards, television specials. Maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of North American Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First, the Christmas story is important because it is. . .

## A Story that Has *Endured*

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.[\[1\]](#)

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human

longings does the Christmas story portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people? Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Second, the Christmas story is also . . .

## **A Story of *Hope* and *Survival***

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.[\[2\]](#)

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary traveled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival, hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name . . . [would] be the hope of all the world."[\[3\]](#)

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is . . .

# A Story of *Peace* and *Goodwill*

Christmas carolers sing of “peace on earth.” Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

I encountered ten-year-old Matt from Nebraska in a southern California restaurant men’s room one afternoon. Alone and forlorn looking, he stood outside the lone stall.

“Could I ask a favor?” inquired the sandy haired youth. “The door to this stall has no lock. Would you watch and be sure that no one comes in on me?” “Sure,” I replied, happy to guard his privacy. Matt noted, “In a lot of nice restaurants the stall doors don’t have locks.” “I know,” I agreed. “You’d think they would.”

After a pause, his high-pitched voice said, “You know what I wish? I wish there could be peace in all the earth and no more arguments or fighting so no one would have to die except by heart attacks.” “That would be great,” I agreed. “How do you think that could happen?” Matt didn’t know.

“It seems that the Prince of Peace could help,” I suggested. “Do you know who that is?” He didn’t. “Well, at Christmas, we talk a lot about Jesus as the Prince of Peace,” I explained.

“Oh, I see,” conceded Matt. “I don’t know about those things because I don’t go to church. Do you know what it’s like to be the only boy in your town who doesn’t go to church? I do.”

“Well, I’m a church member,” I replied, “but really the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ as your personal friend. When I was eighteen, some friends explained to me that He died and rose again for me and that I could begin a relationship with Him. It made a big difference and gave me a real peace inside. He can also bring peace between people.”

By now, Matt was out washing his hands as his father stuck his

head in the door to hurry him along. I gave him a small booklet that explained more. “Thanks,” smiled Matt as he walked out to join his family for lunch.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a “virus of good feeling” spreading through the city from this “urban peacemaker” whose good will had softened hearts.{4}

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds, “‘Don’t be afraid! . . . I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!”{5} A crowd of angels then appeared praising God and proclaiming peace among people of good will.{6}

The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is . . .

## **A Story of *Family***

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph’s fiancée became pregnant though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a

nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as “a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace . . . [Mary] publicly.”<sup>{7}</sup> But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to “name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>{8}</sup> Joseph followed instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy’s birth and early childhood. With God’s help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story is Christmas is also . . .

## **A story of *Humility***

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, great pomp often ensues. From a biblical perspective, God came first not as a ruling king but as a servant, a baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus displayed by becoming human:

*Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he*

*obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.*[{9}](#)

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?[{10}](#)

Reason number six why the Christmas story matters: it is . . .

## **A Story that Was *Foretold***

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.[{11}](#)

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One" from Bethlehem.[{12}](#) We know that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."[{13}](#)

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."[{14}](#) The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore Him.[{15}](#)

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in  $10^{17}$  that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says  $10^{17}$  silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the

whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in  $10^{17}$ , the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies “just happened” to come true in this man, Jesus.[{16}](#)

In a similar vein, consider reason number seven why the original Christmas story matters. It is . . .

## **A Story that Has *Substantial* Support**

Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Three important points:

- *Eyewitness Testimony*. The Gospels—presentations of Jesus’ life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.
- *Early Date*. Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world’s leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.[{17}](#) There is no known record of NT factual authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.
- *Manuscript Evidence*. Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded, “Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”[{18}](#)

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family and humility. It was foretold by prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus’ birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is . . .

# A Story of Love

Jesus' followers taught that His conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning and purpose. Alas, our own self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call "sin." If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, He carried the penalty due all our sins then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."[\[19\]](#) God can become your friend if you believe in Him, that is, if you trust Him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in Him? You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of His family. Perhaps you'd like to talk to Him right now. You might want to tell Him something like this:

*Jesus Christ, thanks for loving me, for dying for my sins and rising again. Please apply your death as the means of my forgiveness. I accept your pardon. Come and live in me and help me to become your close friend.*

If you made that decision to place your trust in Jesus, He has entered your life, forgiven you and given you eternal life. I encourage you to tell another of His followers about your



decision and ask them to help you grow in faith. Call this radio station or visit the Web site [probe.org](http://probe.org) to learn more. Read the Bible to discover more about God. Begin with the Gospel of John, the fourth book in the New Testament, which is one of the easier ones to understand. Tell God what is on your heart, and tell others about the discovery you've made so they can know Him too.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busyness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

## Notes

1. Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.
2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.
3. Matthew 12:21 NLT.
4. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.
5. Luke 2:10-11 NLT.
6. Luke 2:13-14 NASB.
7. Matthew 1:19 NLT.
8. Matthew 1:21 NLT.
9. Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.
10. For more on evidence for Jesus, see [www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com](http://www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com) and [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).
11. For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.
12. Micah 5:2.
13. Matthew 2:1 NASB.
14. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
15. Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.
16. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press,

1969), 99-112.

17. McDowell, op. cit., 62-63.

18. Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, op. cit., 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41 ff.

19. John 3:16 NLT.

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# Christianity: The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Women

*Sue Bohlin examines the facts to show us that a Christian, biblical worldview of women lifted them from a status equivalent to dogs to a position a fellow heirs of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Christianity, accurately applied, fundamentally changed the value and status of women.*

## The Low Status of Women in Jesus' Day

Some feminists charge that Christianity, the Bible, and the Church are anti-female and horribly oppressive to women. Does God really hate women? Did the apostle Paul disrespect them in his New Testament writings? In this article we'll be looking at why Christianity is the best thing that ever happened to women, with insights from Alvin Schmidt's book *How Christianity Changed the World*.[\[1\]](#)

“What would be the status of women in the Western world today had Jesus Christ never entered the human arena? One way to answer this question,” writes Dr. Schmidt, “is to look at the status of women in most present-day Islamic countries. Here women are still denied many rights that are available to men, and when they appear in public, they must be veiled. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are even barred from driving an automobile. Whether in Saudi Arabia or in many other Arab countries where the Islamic religion is adhered to strongly, a man has the right to beat and sexually desert his wife, all with the full support of the Koran. . . .{2} This command is the polar opposite of what the New Testament says regarding a man’s relationship with his wife. Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ And he added, ‘He who loves his wife loves himself.’”{3}



Jesus loved women and treated them with great respect and dignity. The New Testament’s teaching on women developed His perspective even more. The value of women that permeates the New Testament isn’t found in the Greco-Roman culture or the cultures of other societies.

In ancient Greece, a respectable woman was not allowed to leave the house unless she was accompanied by a trustworthy male escort. A wife was not permitted to eat or interact with male guests in her husband’s home; she had to retire to her woman’s quarters. Men kept their wives under lock and key, and women had the social status of a slave. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and when they grew up they were not allowed to speak in public. Women were considered inferior to men. The Greek poets equated women with evil. Remember Pandora and her box? Woman was responsible for unleashing evil on the world.{4}

The status of Roman women was also very low. Roman law placed a wife under the absolute control of her husband, who had

ownership of her and all her possessions. He could divorce her if she went out in public without a veil. A husband had the power of life and death over his wife, just as he did his children. As with the Greeks, women were not allowed to speak in public.[{5}](#)

Jewish women, as well, were barred from public speaking. The oral law prohibited women from reading the Torah out loud. Synagogue worship was segregated, with women never allowed to be heard.

## Jesus and Women

Jesus' treatment of women was very different:

*The extremely low status that the Greek, Roman, and Jewish woman had for centuries was radically affected by the appearance of Jesus Christ. His actions and teachings raised the status of women to new heights, often to the consternation and dismay of his friends and enemies. By word and deed, he went against the ancient, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices that defined woman as socially, intellectually, and spiritually inferior.*

*The humane and respectful way Jesus treated and responded to the Samaritan woman [at the well] (recorded in John 4) may not appear unusual to readers in today's Western culture. Yet what he did was extremely unusual, even radical. He ignored the Jewish anti-Samaritan prejudices along with prevailing view that saw women as inferior beings.[{6}](#)*

He started a conversation with her—a Samaritan, a woman—in public. The rabbinic oral law was quite explicit: “He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself.” Another rabbinic teaching prominent in Jesus' day taught, “One is not so much as to greet a woman.”[{7}](#) So we can understand why his disciples were amazed to find him talking to a woman in public. Can we even imagine how it must have stunned this

woman for the Messiah to reach out to her and offer her living water for her thirsty soul?

Among Jesus' closest friends were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who entertained him at their home. "Martha assumed the traditional female role of preparing a meal for Jesus, her guest, while her sister Mary did what only men would do, namely, learn from Jesus' teachings. Mary was the cultural deviant, but so was Jesus, because he violated the rabbinic law of his day [about speaking to women]." [\[8\]](#) By teaching Mary spiritual truths, he violated another rabbinic law, which said, "Let the words of the Law [Torah] be burned rather than taught to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lechery." [\[9\]](#)

When Lazarus died, Jesus comforted Martha with this promise containing the heart of the Christian gospel: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26) These remarkable words were spoken to a woman! "To teach a woman was bad enough, but Jesus did more than that. He called for a verbal response from Martha. Once more, he went against the socioreligious custom by teaching a woman and by having her publicly respond to him, a man." [\[10\]](#)

"All three of the Synoptic Gospels note that women followed Jesus, a highly unusual phenomenon in first-century Palestine. . . . This behavior may not seem unusual today, but in Jesus' day it was highly unusual. Scholars note that in the prevailing culture only prostitutes and women of very low reputation would follow a man without a male escort." [\[11\]](#) These women were not groupies; some of them provided financial support for Jesus and the apostles (Luke 8:3).

The first people Jesus chose to appear to after his resurrection were women; not only that, but he instructed them to tell his disciples that he was alive (Matt. 28, John 20).

In a culture where a woman's testimony was worthless because she was worthless, Jesus elevated the value of women beyond anything the world had seen.

## **Paul, Peter, and Women**

Jesus gave women status and respect equal to men. Not only did he break with the anti-female culture of his era, but he set a standard for Christ-followers. Peter and Paul both rose to the challenge in what they wrote in the New Testament.

In a culture that feared the power of a woman's external beauty and feminine influence, Peter encouraged women to see themselves as valuable because God saw them as valuable. His call to aspire to the inner beauty of a trusting and tranquil spirit is staggeringly counter-cultural. He writes, "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful."

Equally staggering is his call to men to elevate their wives with respect and understanding: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Consideration, respect, fellow heirs; these concepts sound good to us, but they were unheard of in the first century!

The apostle Paul is often accused of being a misogynist, one who hates and fears women. But Paul's teachings on women reflect the creation order and high value God places on women as creatures made in his image. Paul's commands for husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 provided a completely new way to look at marriage: as an earthbound illustration of the spiritual

mystery of the union of Christ and His bride, the church. He calls wives to not only submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but he calls husbands to submit to Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). He calls men to love their wives in the self-sacrificing way Christ loves the church. In a culture where a wife was property, and a disrespected piece of property at that, Paul elevates women to a position of honor previously unknown in the world.

Paul also provided highly countercultural direction for the New Testament church. In the Jewish synagogue, women had no place and no voice in worship. In the pagan temples, the place of women was to serve as prostitutes. The church, on the other hand, was a place for women to pray and prophecy out loud (1 Cor. 11:5). The spiritual gifts—supernatural enablings to build God’s church—are given to women as well as men. Older women are commanded to teach younger ones. The invitation to women to participate in worship of Jesus was unthinkable—but true.

## Misogyny in the Church

Author Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, wrote:

*Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as ‘The women, God help us!’ or ‘The ladies, God bless them!’; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.*

She continues: "There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature."[{12}](#) And this is one of the unfortunate truths about Christianity we have to acknowledge: over the centuries, many Christ-followers have fallen far short of the standard Jesus set in showing the worth and dignity of women.

In the second century Clement of Alexandria believed and taught that every woman should blush because she is a woman. Tertullian, who lived about the same time, said, "You [Eve] are the devil's gateway. . . . You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die." Augustine, in the fourth century, believed that a woman's image of God was inferior to that of the man's.[{13}](#) And unfortunately it gets even nastier than that.

Some people mistakenly believe these contemptuous beliefs of the church fathers are rooted in an anti-female Bible, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. People held these misogynistic beliefs *in spite of*, not because of, the biblical teachings. Those who dishonor God by dishonoring His good creation of woman allow themselves to be shaped by the beliefs of the surrounding pagan, anti-female culture instead of following Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). The church in North America does the same thing today by allowing the secular culture to shape our thinking more than the Bible. Only nine percent of Americans claiming to be born-again have a biblical worldview.[{14}](#) The church in Africa and Asia does the same thing today by allowing animism, the traditional folk religion, to shape their thinking more than the Bible.

It's unfortunate that some of the church fathers did not allow the woman-honoring principles found in Scripture to change



their unbiblical beliefs. But that is the failing of imperfect followers of Jesus, not a failure of God nor of His Word. Jesus loves women.

## Effects of Christianity on Culture

As Christianity spread throughout the world, its redemptive effects elevated women and set them free in many ways. The Christian ethic declared equal worth and value for both men and women. Husbands were commanded to love their wives and not exasperate their children. These principles were in direct conflict with the Roman institution of *patria potestas*, which gave absolute power of life and death over a man's family, including his wife. When *patria potestas* was finally repealed by an emperor who was moved by high biblical standards, what a tremendous effect that had on the culture! Women were also granted basically the same control over their property as men, and, for the first time, mothers were allowed to be guardians of their children.{15}

The biblical view of husbands and wives as equal partners caused a sea change in marriage as well. Christian women started marrying later, and they married men of their own choosing. This eroded the ancient practice of men marrying child brides against their will, often as young as eleven or twelve years old. The greater marital freedom that Christianity gave women eventually gained wide appeal. Today, a Western woman is not compelled to marry someone she does not want, nor can she legally be married as a child bride. But the practice continues in parts of the world where Christianity has little or no presence.{16}

Another effect of the salt and light of Christianity was its impact on the common practice of polygamy, which demeans women. Many men, including biblical heroes, have had multiple wives, but Jesus made clear this was never God's intention. Whenever he spoke about marriage, it was always in the context of monogamy. He said, "The two [not three or four] will become

one flesh.” As Christianity spread, God’s intention of monogamous marriages became the norm.[{17}](#)

Two more cruel practices were abolished as Christianity gained influence. In some cultures, such as India, widows were burned alive on their husbands’ funeral pyres. In China, the crippling practice of foot binding was intended to make women totter on their pointed, slender feet in a seductive manner. It was finally outlawed only about a hundred years ago.[{18}](#)

As a result of Jesus Christ and His teachings, women in much of the world today, especially in the West, enjoy more privileges and rights than at any other time in history. It takes only a cursory trip to an Arab nation or to a Third World country to see how little freedom women have in countries where Christianity has had little or no presence.[{19}](#) It’s the best thing that ever happened to women.

## Notes

1. Schmidt, Alvin. *How Christianity Changed the World*. Originally published under the title *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), which is the copy I reference in these notes.

2. “Men stand superior to women.... But those whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and remove them into bedchambers and beat them; but if they submit to you then do not seek a way against them” Sura 4:34, as quoted in Schmidt, p. 97.

3. Schmidt, p. 97-98.

4. Ibid., p. 98-99.

5. Ibid., p. 101.

6. Ibid., p. 102-03.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 103-104.
10. Ibid., p. 104.
11. Ibid., p. 104-105.
12. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 47.
13. Schmidt, p. 109.
14. "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," The Barna Research Group, Ltd. <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=154>.
15. Ibid., p. 111.
16. Ibid., pp. 111-112.
17. Ibid., p. 115.
18. Ibid., pp. 118-119.
19. Ibid., p. 115.

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## The Roots of Freedom

*What is freedom? What are the roots of freedom? Kerby Anderson looks at the Christian roots of freedom along with the writings of the key writers in the Western tradition.*

What is freedom? What are the roots of freedom? Answering these questions is not as easy as it may seem. They require some thought and reflection, which for most of us, is a precious commodity.



Fortunately, some of the hard work has been done for us by professor John Danford in his book *Roots of Freedom: A Primer on Modern Liberty*. The material in this book was originally material that was broadcast on Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in the late 1980s. Only later did some suggest that the material should be published so that citizens in a free society could also benefit by his work in describing the roots of freedom.

So how does John Danford describe a free society?

*People would surely differ, but what is meant here is a society in which human beings are not “born into” a place—a caste or an occupation, for example—but are free to own property, to raise children, to earn a living, to think, to worship, to express political views, and even to emigrate if desired, and to do so without seeking permission from a master.*[{1}](#)

Obviously we all have some constraints on us, but human freedom in a free society would certainly involve the freedom to be able to do the things mentioned above.

Once we define a free society, we can easily see something very disturbing. “Free societies have been rare in human history. They also seem to be fragile—more fragile than were the dynasties or empires of the ancient world.”[{2}](#)

In the past, freedom was rare often because of economic necessity. There is little or no freedom for a person who must work every waking hour just to survive. In the ancient world, a free man was free because another was enslaved. A free man was free because he did not need to work for a living.

By the end of the eighteenth century, economic necessity ceased to be the main obstacle to freedom in many places. Yet there were still very few free societies, because political power was often concentrated in the hands of a king or dictator (or perhaps in the hands of a few in the ruling class).

Today we have few kings, but we still have many dictators. Free societies also still somewhat rare today. Consider that there are nearly 200 countries in the United Nations, and yet it is probably fair to say that fewer than 50 could truly be called free societies (with functioning democracies).

If nothing else, this study of the roots of freedom should make us thankful we live in a free country. Free societies are rare in history, and they are still somewhat rare today. We should never take for granted the political and economic freedom we enjoy.

## **Christian Roots**

Danford discusses the roots of liberty in his chapter on "Premodern Christianity." Although we take many of these assumptions (borrowed from Christianity) as basic and obvious, they are important contributions that provide the foundation for the political freedom we enjoy today.

The first contribution from Christianity was its teaching about the value of the individual. In the Greek and Roman empires, the individual counted for little. "A particular individual was of no consequence when measured against the glory and stability of the empire."[\[3\]](#)

Jesus and his followers taught men and women to think of themselves as significant in the eyes of God. This foundational principle of the dignity and sanctity of human beings was in stark contrast to the prevailing ideas of the day.

Another aspect of this principle was the belief that God was not just the god of a city, or a tribe, or even a nation. The God of the Bible is God over all human beings and savior of all individuals. The belief in the universality of God along with the emphasis on the individual provided an important foundation for liberty because it was “incompatible with the ancient tendency to subordinate the individual entirely to the state or empire.”{4}

A second contribution of Christianity involves the linear idea of history. Ancient writers “understood the passage of time in terms of the seasonal rhythms of the natural world.”{5} Christianity brought a different perspective by teaching that history is linear. The story of the Bible is the story, after all, of the beginning of the world, human sinfulness, Christ coming to the world, and the eventual culmination of history.

The concept of linear history leads to the idea that circumstances can change over time. If the change is progressive, then over the course of human history there can be progress. “The notion of progress is itself a modern idea, but its roots can be discerned in the Christian doctrine that God enters historical time to save mankind.”{6}

A third contribution of Christianity is the principle of the separation of faith from the political realm. Today this is referred to as the separation of church and state.{7} Such an idea was unthinkable in the ancient world. In those cultures, kings and priests were closely connected.

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees if it was lawful to pay the poll tax (Matt. 22:15-21), He responded by telling them “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Although it would be many centuries before the full implications of this doctrine were clear, the seeds of spiritual freedom can be found in this Christian teaching.

The fourth contribution of Christianity is the belief in objective truth. While it is true that other philosophers spoke of truth, a Christian perspective on truth is nevertheless an important, additional contribution.

For example, if there is no truth, then “there is no such thing as a just or proper foundation for political rule: whoever gets the power is by definition able to determine what is just or unjust, right or wrong.”[\[8\]](#)

In our postmodern world that rejects the idea of objective or absolute truth, all history is merely the history of class struggle. “There is no escape from the endless quest for power, and no space, protected by walls of justice, where genuine freedom can be experienced.”[\[9\]](#)

This nation was founded on the principle (as articulated in the Declaration of Independence) that there are self-evident truths. As Jesus taught his disciples, “you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

## Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in England in 1588, and was educated at Oxford in the early 1600s. He was influenced by such men as Francis Bacon (serving as Bacon’s secretary for a time) as well as events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A principal influence was the religious war and conflict of the time (e.g., the Thirty Years War, conflicts in England between Anglicans and Puritans). “Hobbes’s two great preoccupations [were]: peace as a goal of the civil order, and a new political science as the means to that goal.”[\[10\]](#)

He developed five key principles in his political science. The first is that individuals are more fundamental than any social order. To understand humans, he would argue, we must go back to a “state of nature” which would represent the condition human beings would be in if all the conventions and laws of

political society were removed.

Hobbes also argued that humans are equal politically. "No one can be viewed as politically superior, because every human being is vulnerable to violent death at the hands of his fellows."[{11}](#) The natural condition of mankind, he says, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[{12}](#)

Hobbes therefore argues in his second principle that the natural need for self-preservation is the only true reason people live in political communities. In other words, we live in political communities to satisfy individual needs of human nature such as life and security.

Third, Hobbes argues that because these needs are universal (and scientifically demonstrable), they provide a basis for agreement and a peaceful political order. He argues that we should "be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself."[{13}](#)

Fourth, since political society exists for self-preservation, no one can ever give up the right to self-defense. A cardinal principle of a liberal society is that no man can be compelled to confess a crime or to testify against himself in court.

Finally, all legitimate government rests on a contract consented to (at least tacitly) by individuals. Hobbes calls this agreement a "covenant" because it is an open-ended contract, a promise that must be continually fulfilled in the future.

Hobbes also argued that a sovereign must enforce this covenant because "covenants without the sword are but words."[{14}](#) But though he justified a powerful government or sovereign, it was a perspective that was challenged by others like John Locke who believed that even the sovereign must be limited.



# John Locke

John Locke was the son of a Puritan who fought with Oliver Cromwell. Though he was not an orthodox Puritan like his father, he was nevertheless a sincere Christian who believed that the Bible was “infallibly true.”

Locke argued in his *Two Treatises of Government* that men form societies “for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property.”[\[15\]](#) On the one hand, he wrote that material things are not owned by anyone but exist in common for all men. “God, as King David says, (Psalm 115:16) has given the earth to the children of men, given it to mankind in common.”[\[16\]](#) But on the other hand, he also acknowledged that we do take possession of things and thus make them our property.

*He that is nourished by the acorns he picked under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. Nobody can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask then, When did they begin to be his? When he digested? Or when he ate? Or when he boiled? Or when he brought them home? Or when he picked them up? And 'tis plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labor put a distinction between them and common. That added something to them more than nature, the common mother of all, had done; and so they became his private property.*[\[17\]](#)

Locke also argued that land is ultimately worthless until labor it added to it. He even goes on to argue that wealth is almost wholly the product of human labor (he says 999/1000 of the value of things is the result of labor).

He also argued that “Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another,

without his own consent.”{18} He acknowledged that each man or woman is born free and becomes a member of a commonwealth by agreeing to accept its protections, but most commonly this is done by what Locke call “tacit consent.”

Finally, Locke also focused his concern about the possibility of an oppressive government, so he insisted on the necessity of limiting the sovereign power as much as possible. The legislature cannot “take from any man any part of his property without his own consent.”{19}

Locke also insisted on one final limitation of the power of government: the citizenry. He writes, “yet the legislative being only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends, there remains still in the people of supreme power to remove or alter the legislative, when they find the legislative to act contrary to the trust reposed in them.”{20}

## American Liberty

The ideas of freedom found their way to the American shore as disruptions of the English civil war drove many English subjects to the New World. In their travels, “they took with them as much of the system of English liberty as would survive the Atlantic crossing.”{21}

Some of the settlers established civil compacts (or what Locke would later call social contracts). Perhaps the best known is the Mayflower Compact, which was a political covenant binding the pilgrims together into “a civil body politic.” Most of these American settlements involved self-government simply because the powers that originally granted them their charters were thousands of miles away.

America’s founding document is the Declaration of Independence. The ideas of John Locke can certainly be found within this document. The Declaration states the principle from Locke that “all men are created equal.” It also follows

his thinking by stating "That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

All the writers during the founding period (Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton) were "deeply learned in English history, political history generally, and the history of political thought back to Aristotle and Plato. References to Cicero, Tacitus, and Plutarch dot their pages, along with frequent allusions to republics as diverse as Venice, Holland, Geneva, Sparta, and Rome." [\[22\]](#)

Alexander Hamilton, writing in *The Federalist Papers*, said that the American people would decide "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." [\[23\]](#)

James Madison, in *The Federalist Papers*, addressed two key issues in American government: factions and limiting governmental power. He suggested that the large federal republic made it more difficult for factions to gain power and oppress others.

Limiting the power of government was accomplished by separating power. "Ambition must counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place." [\[24\]](#) The framers pursued "the policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests" to these various branches of government.

As an extra precaution, the framers also divided the legislature (because it was expected to be the most powerful and dangerous branch) into two different houses. They also decided to "render them, by different modes of election and different principles of action, as little connected with each

other as the nature of their common functions and their common dependence on the society will admit.”{25}

They further protected individual rights by adding the Bill of Rights. These amendments explicitly deny power to the government to interfere with specific individual freedoms.

As we can see, the rights and freedoms we enjoy today developed over time through Christian influence and key writers in the Western tradition.

## Notes

1. John W. Danford, *Roots of Freedom: A Primer on Modern Liberty* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), xiv.
2. Ibid., xiv-xv.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 14.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 15-16.
7. See my article, “The Separation of Church and State” on the Probe Web site at [www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4218097/k.32BB/Separation\\_of\\_Church\\_and\\_State.htm](http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4218097/k.32BB/Separation_of_Church_and_State.htm).
8. Ibid, 18.
9. Ibid., 20.
10. Ibid., 77.
11. Ibid., 83.
12. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 76.
13. Ibid, 80.
14. Ibid., 106.
15. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Second Treatise, Par. 123, 395.
16. Ibid., Par. 25, 327.
17. Ibid., Par 28, 329-330.
18. Ibid., Par. 95, 375.

19. Ibid., Par. 138, 406.
20. Ibid., Par. 149, 413.
21. Danford, 146.
22. Ibid., 149.
23. Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), No. 1, 33.
24. Ibid., No. 51, 322.
25. Ibid.

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## Tale of Two Republics

It's hard to read an historical account of the ancient Roman Republic without being tempted to compare its successes and failures with America. For some, it follows that if the mighty Roman Empire fell because of moral, economic, and military blunders, the U.S. shall relinquish its greatness by committing similar errors. The problem with this argument is that it's a form of political reductionism that leaves out the providence of God. He alone determines the destiny of nations and peoples. He alone brings revival, causing people to repent and nations to turn from sin.

Although we can find similarities between different historical settings, every historical event is unique. And even though similar patterns of behavior might be found in both eras, modern America is very different from ancient Rome. With all of that said, there are certainly trends within cultures that prove to be deleterious to the social fabric that binds together a nation.

In this article we will compare social trends and attitudes found among the ruling class of ancient Rome with those of

modern America. In one sense the empire built by the Roman Republic was itself surprisingly modern. Its success was powered by large scale business enterprises, cutting edge technology, and economic opportunity for the upper class. It also had a highly structured and disciplined army that made it the dominant military force on the planet much like America is today. Although only a small percentage of the total population was involved, the Roman Republic engaged a significant number of people in the political process which was rare for any nation until modern times.

Another similarity between the ancient Romans and modern Americans is that both tend to see themselves as the “most morally upright people in the world.” This dangerous human tendency is amplified by military success and goes hand-in-hand with the unspoken assumption of “How could an immoral people prosper as we do?”

In the recent book, *Rubicon*, by Tom Holland, the story is told of how changes in the Roman culture and leadership eventually brought an end to 460 years of the Republic, ushering in a period of absolute rule by Augustus in 27 B.C. Using material from this book, we will look at how big business and materialism corrupted politics and foreign relations, how power distorted justice and reduced individuals to a commodity, and how nationalism was twisted into a tool for building political power and personal gain. Finally, we will explore how individuals were able to overthrow the Republic and impose tyrannical rule on Rome in the name of tradition and conservative principles.

America is not ancient Rome. However, without the constraints of a biblical worldview it is not hard to see how a future leader or political movement might steal the republic from the American people all in the name of patriotism and tradition.

# Big Business, Materialism, and the Military

Back in the sixties, protestors against the war in Vietnam focused on the danger inherent in what was called the military-industrial complex, the partnership between the American companies producing weapons and military supplies, and those who used them. The charge was that America was using its military to both protect and feed America's big business concerns, and in return, big business was providing the military with what it needed to be dominant on the battlefield. In a speech in 1961, President Eisenhower warned that

*In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.*[{1}](#)

He went on to explain that

*This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government.*[{2}](#)

Rome had its own military-industrial complex. As proconsul of the East (in 64 B.C.), Pompey occupied Antioch, the capital of

Syria, and shortly afterwards Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea. His justification was to protect Roman interests in the region which turned out to be mostly business interests. Pompey was willing to intervene in or impose direct rule on any territory in the interest of maintaining peace and a good business environment. This *Pax Romana* protected unbridled exploitation by Roman entrepreneurs.

The Roman Republic was fueled by big business and its military victories were often turned into a license to make money. Cities were ransacked for treasure, mining was conducted on a scale not to be witnessed again until the Industrial Revolution, and in one city, smelting furnaces caused pollution so bad that naked skin burned and turned white upon exposure.[\[3\]](#)

A culture that encourages limitless greed and personal glory opens itself up to unbridled corruption and bloodshed. The Romans soon found that the republic they so cherished could not survive with leadership that would go to any lengths, and tell any lie, that might keep them in power. The American republic is also fragile. When a “profit at any cost mentality” becomes too embedded, it corrupts both accounting practices and governmental policy.

God did not spare even his people when it became evident that they were corrupted by greed. The prophet Amos warned Judah that God was bringing on judgment because “They [the people of God] trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.”[\[4\]](#) God is still concerned about justice. It will always be in every nation’s interest to seek justice for all people and to act upon ethical principles beyond the profit motive or personal glory.

## **The Politics of Power**

One common trait of both the ancient Roman Republic and the



early United States is that they shared a dependence on slave labor. The Romans believed that if a man allowed himself to be enslaved, then he thoroughly deserved his fate. As they conquered much of the known world, the Romans plundered the wealth of each new territory, and human beings were a major part of this booty. The empire established a single market that moved slaves around the Mediterranean Sea in vast numbers. Millions of slaves owned by wealthy and not so wealthy Roman citizens performed most of the tasks that made Rome rich and powerful.

Even though slavery had virtually vanished in Christian Europe, it was reestablished when the Portuguese began to trade with Africa in the mid-fourteenth century. There had always been slavery in Africa, and it was further developed by Arab traders after the emergence of Islam which regulated its use. Eventually, the Portuguese took over the slave trade and made it more impersonal and horrible than ever. As the Portuguese and Spanish traveled westward, they brought slavery with them. This slave trade became an early component of life in the New World and, eventually, in America.

The result of this dependency was living in constant fear of slaves and a slave revolt. In the Roman Republic, Spartacus led a group of slaves in such a revolt in 73 B.C. that grew to be an army of over 100,000. The rebellion was eventually crushed by politically ambitious leaders Crassus and Pompey. Crassus sent a violent message against future revolts by having the defeated army of Spartacus crucified every forty yards along a one hundred mile stretch of road outside of Rome. America experienced its bloodiest conflict in the Civil War, primarily over the slavery issue. Both cultures endured a degradation of society as a result of slavery. Thomas Jefferson thought that slavery was an evil institution that corrupted the slave owner more than the slave, yet he owned and traded slaves most of his life.

The Roman Republic continued to live with the tension of slave

ownership and labor until its demise. The U. S. ended slavery, but has continued to suffer the effects of enslaving an entire people for centuries. Distrust and anger still exist between races in America, and the gospel message is often tainted because the Bible was used as a justification by some for enslaving millions.

When a society recognizes the uniqueness and significance of each citizen, it is acknowledging the biblical teaching that all individuals are made in God's image. How the current conflicts over other moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia are settled will determine whether we continue to move closer to or further from this biblical principle.

## **Conservatism Abused**

The word *conservative* can mean different things to different people. However, as the name implies, it usually points to someone who is trying to conserve or protect traditional values, values that are often seen as fundamental to both the creation of and the continuance of a nation or political entity. Conservatives argue in defense of what are often called the "permanent things" relating to spiritual, political, and familial ideals. Conservatives in the Roman Republic and the current United States have both referred often to these "permanent things." In some cases, the "permanent things" have been used as a screen to support other agendas or to simply gain power and prestige.

The "permanent things" of the Roman Republic were quite different from today's America. The myth of Romulus and Remus, whose simple childhood home was preserved on a hillside in Rome, is one example. Their legend includes a violent struggle against one another, ending in the death of Remus, which over time came to depict the enduring struggle between the aristocracy of Rome and the plebian class. Another permanent ideal was the freedom from economic or political slavery that

was felt by many Romans to be the key to the Republic's success. A corollary to this freedom was the severe meritocracy supported by the unwritten constitution that guided the nation. Each man was to seek glory and wealth in the name of Rome, and his success or failure would determine his destiny. Strong leaders such as Sulla would sometimes violate the ancient rules of Rome and its unwritten constitution in order to "save it" from perceived or real threats to the Republic. For example, in 88 B.C. Sulla led an army on Rome, violating an ancient tradition. Generals commissioned to serve Rome swore never to enter the city with their soldiers, a tradition that had existed intact for hundreds of years. Sulla claimed that he violated this tradition in order to save the Republic from his political enemy Marius, but he was acting mostly out of desire for personal power and glory.

Ancient Rome also had its traditional religious beliefs and institutions. The temple of Jupiter was at the center of the city as were temples to other Roman gods. Political careers could be ruined if one ignored the traditional role of religion in Roman culture.

America has obvious traditions regarding the role of government, family, and religion. It is unlikely that an outspoken atheist or someone who denied the authority of the U.S. Constitution could be elected president. However, the Roman Republic was lost when men, in the name of conserving the traditions of the Roman people, began to ignore the very rules established by those traditions in their pursuit of personal power and glory.

## **The Fall of the Republic**

Another group which grew increasingly more influential in the Empire and its provinces were the *publicani*. These were businessmen who ran large business cartels that benefited from

the unquestioned dominance of Rome's military power. These business ventures sold shares, had shareholder meetings, elected directors to a governing board, and were as profit motivated as any present day multinational corporation. Although they held no official government title, the *publicani* wielded considerable authority in Rome's provinces and were held in contempt for their merciless extraction of wealth by any means necessary.

This military-fiscal complex corrupted what had been a traditional policy of isolationism in Rome. One provincial administrator, Rutilius Rufus, attempted to restrain the abuse caused by the *publicani* and tax collectors but was himself brought to court, convicted, and exiled in 92 B.C.

Eventually, the provincials fought back. Finding the provinces of Asia poorly defended, Mithridates, the King of Pontus, quickly defeated the Roman forces and encouraged the locals to take their revenge. In the summer of 88 B.C. he ordered the massacre of every Roman and Italian left in Asia. Eighty thousand men, women, and children were killed during one bloody night. Mithridates was seen by the Greeks as a divine source of retribution against the hated superpower of the day. The execution of the Roman commissioner Manius Aquillius provides a vivid picture of the animosity held by many towards Rome. Mithridates order some of the gold treasure held by the Romans to be melted down. Then, Aquillius's head was held back, his mouth forced open, and the molten metal poured down his throat.

I am not equating Rome's experience with modern America. It would be too easy and false to match Osama bin Laden's motives and actions with those of Mithridates. But unfortunately, any nation that rises to the level of wealth and power that the U.S. has will attract resentment and jealous hatred. At the same time, we have to be wise stewards of all that God has blessed us with. We should be known for our justice and mercy, not just our military power.

Even if we do everything right, some will resent our actions. That is why Christians in business and government must avoid even the appearance of evil and work to make America a source of healing and freedom for oppressed people everywhere. We cannot allow those who mislabel our deeds cause us to grow weary of doing good. We should never fall victim to donor fatigue when it comes to hunger or natural disaster; God has blessed us with too much to not get involved. The difference between the Roman Empire and the U. S. is our awareness that God requires much from those who have been given much.

## Notes

1. Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, p. 1035-1040 Found at <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>
2. Ibid.
3. Holland, Tom, *Rubicon* (Doubleday, 2003) p. 41.
4. Amos 2:7

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# History and the Christian Faith

*For many people in our world today "history," as Henry Ford once said, "is bunk." Indeed, some people go so far as to say*

*that we really can't know anything at all about the past! But since the truth of Christianity depends on certain historical events (like the resurrection of Jesus, for example) having actually occurred, Dr. Michael Gleghorn shows why there is no good reason to be so skeptical about our knowledge of the past.*

## **The Importance of History**

Can we really know anything at all about the past? For example, can we really know if Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., or if Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical person, or if Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? Although these might sound like questions that would only interest professional historians, they're actually important for Christians too.

But why should Christians be concerned with such questions? Well, because the truth of our faith depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. As British theologian Alan Richardson stated:



The Christian faith is . . . an historical faith . . . it is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred . . . then the . . . Christian faith . . . would be found to have been built on sand.[{1}](#)

Consider an example. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. Now, in order for this belief to even possibly be true, the crucifixion of Jesus must have occurred in history. If the account of Jesus' death on the cross is merely legendary, or otherwise unhistorical, then the Christian proclamation that he died on the cross for our sins cannot be true. As T. A. Roberts observed:

The truth of Christianity is anchored in history: hence the .

. . recognition that if some . . . of the events upon which Christianity has been traditionally thought to be based could be proved unhistorical, then the religious claims of Christianity would be seriously jeopardized.[\[2\]](#)

What actually happened in the past, therefore, is extremely significant for biblical Christianity. But this raises an important question: How can we really know what happened in the past? How can we know if the things we read about in our history books ever really happened? How can we know if Jesus *really* was crucified, as the Gospel writers say he was? We weren't there to personally observe these events. And (at least so far) there's no time machine by which we can visit the past and see for ourselves what really happened. The events of the past are gone. They're no longer directly available for study. So how can we ever *really* know what happened?

For the Christian, such questions confront us with the issue of whether genuine knowledge of the past is possible or whether we're forever doomed to be skeptical about the historical events recorded in the Bible. In the remainder of this article I hope to show that we should indeed be skeptical, particularly of the arguments of skeptics who say that we can know nothing of the past.

## **The Problem of the Unobservable Past**

It shouldn't surprise us that the truth of Christianity depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, if the bodily resurrection of Jesus was not an actual historical event, then faith in Christ was useless. What happened in the past, therefore, is important for Christianity.

But some scholars insist that we can never *really* know what

happened in the past. This view, called radical historical relativism, denies that real, or objective, knowledge of the past is possible. This poses a challenge for Christianity. As the Christian philosopher Ronald Nash observes, “. . . the skepticism about the past that must result from a total historical relativism would seriously weaken one of Christianity’s major apologetic foundations.”{3}

But why would anyone be skeptical about our ability to know at least some objective truth about the past? One reason has to do with our inability to directly observe the past. The late Charles Beard noted that, unlike the chemist, the historian cannot directly observe the objects of his study. His only access to the past comes through records and artifacts that have survived to the present.{4}

There is certainly some truth to this. But why does the historian’s inability to directly observe the past mean that he can’t have genuine knowledge of the past? Beard contrasts the historian with the chemist, implying that the latter does have objective knowledge of chemistry. But it’s important to remember that individual chemists don’t acquire *all* their knowledge through direct scientific observation. Indeed, much of it comes from reading journal articles by other chemists, articles that function much like the historical documents of the historian!{5}

But can the chemist really gain objective knowledge by reading such articles? It appears so. Suppose a chemist begins working on a new problem based on the carefully established results of previous experiments. But suppose that he hasn’t personally conducted all these experiments; he’s merely read about them in scientific journals. Any knowledge not directly verified by the chemist would be indirect knowledge.{6} But it’s not *completely* lacking in objectivity for that reason.

While historical knowledge may fall short of absolute certainty (as most of our knowledge invariably does), this



doesn't make it completely subjective or arbitrary. Further, since most of what we know doesn't seem to be based on direct observation, our inability to directly observe the past cannot (at least by itself) make genuine knowledge of history impossible. Ultimately, then, this argument for historical relativism is simply unconvincing.

## **The Problem of Personal Perspective**

I recently spoke with a young man who told me that he gets his news from three different sources: CNN, FOX, and the BBC. When I asked him why, he told me that each station has its own particular perspective. He therefore listens to all three in order to (hopefully) arrive at a more objective understanding of what's really going on in the world.

Interestingly, a similar issue has been observed in the writing of history. Historical relativists argue that no historian can be completely unbiased and value-neutral in his description of the past. Instead, everything he writes, from the selection of historical facts to the connections he sees between those facts, is influenced by his personality, values, and even prejudices. Every work of history (including the historical books of the Bible) is said to be written from a unique viewpoint. It's relative to a particular author's perspective and, hence, cannot be objective.

How should Christians respond to this? Did the biblical writers reliably record what happened in the past? Or are their writings so influenced by their personalities and values that we can never know what *really* happened? Well, it's probably true that every work of history, like every story in a newspaper, is colored (at least to some extent) by the author's worldview. In this sense, absolute objectivity is impossible. But does this mean that historical relativism is true? Not according to Norman Geisler. He writes:

Perfect objectivity may be practically unattainable within the

limited resources of the historian on most if not all topics. But . . . the inability to attain 100 percent objectivity is a long way from total relativity.[\[7\]](#)

While historians and reporters may write from a particular worldview perspective, it doesn't follow that they're completely incapable of at least some objectivity. Indeed, certain safeguards exist which actually help ensure this. Suppose a historian writes that king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not capture Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. His thesis can be challenged and corrected on the basis of the available historical and archaeological evidence which indicates that Nebuchadnezzar did do this. Similarly, if a newspaper runs a story which later turns out to be incorrect, it might be forced to print a retraction.

While complete objectivity in history may be impossible, a sufficient degree of objectivity can nonetheless be attained because the historian's work is subject to correction in light of the evidence. The problem of personal perspective, then, doesn't inevitably lead to total historical relativism. Therefore, objections to the historical reliability of the Bible that are based on this argument are not ultimately persuasive.

## Problems with Historical Relativism

We've seen that historical relativism denies that we can know objective truth about the past. While this poses a challenge to biblical Christianity, the arguments offered in support of this position aren't very convincing. Not only are the *supporting* arguments unconvincing, however, the arguments *against* this position are devastating. Let's look at just two.

First, there are many facts of history that virtually all historians agree on – regardless of their worldview. For example, what responsible historian would seriously deny that George Washington was the first president of the United

States, or that Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? As one historical relativist admitted, “there are basic facts which are the same for all historians.”[\[8\]](#) But consider what this means. If a Christian, a Buddhist, an atheist, and a Muslim can all agree on certain basic facts of history, then it would seem to follow that at least some objective knowledge of history is possible. But in that case, total historical relativism is false, for it *denies* that such knowledge is possible.

Another reason for rejecting historical relativism is that it makes it impossible to distinguish good history from poor history, or genuine history from propaganda. As Dr. Ronald Nash observes, “If hard relativism were true, any distinction between truth and error in history would disappear.”[\[9\]](#) Just think about what this would mean. There would be no real difference between history and historical fiction! Further, there would be no legitimate basis for criticizing obviously false historical theories. This reveals that something is wrong with historical relativism, for as Dr. Craig reminds us, “All historians distinguish good history from poor.” For example, he recalls how Immanuel Velikovsky attempted “to rewrite ancient history on the basis of world-wide catastrophes caused by extra-terrestrial forces . . . dismissing entire ancient kingdoms and languages as fictional.”[\[10\]](#)

How did historians react to such ideas? According to Edwin Yamauchi, who wrote a detailed critical analysis of the theory, most historians were “quite hostile” to Velikovsky’s work.[\[11\]](#) They were irritated by his callous disregard for the actual historical evidence. In a similar vein, one need only remember the tremendous critical response to some of Dan Brown’s more outrageous claims in *The Da Vinci Code*. It’s important to notice that when scholars criticize the theories of Velikovsky and Brown, they tacitly acknowledge “the objectivity of history.”[\[12\]](#) Their criticism shows that they

view these theories as flawed because they don't correspond to what really happened in the past.

Well, with such good reasons for rejecting historical relativism, we needn't fear its threat to biblical Christianity.

## Determining Truth in History

How can we determine what actually happened in the past? Is there any way to separate the "wheat" from the "chaff," so to speak, when it comes to evaluating competing interpretations of a particular historical person or event? For example, if one writer claims Jesus was married, and another claims he wasn't, how can we determine which of the claims is true?

Well as you've probably already guessed, the issue really comes down to the evidence. For information about Jesus, virtually all scholars agree that our most valuable evidence comes from the New Testament Gospels. Each of these documents can be reliably dated to the first century, and "the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."[\[13\]](#) They thus represent our earliest and best sources of information about Jesus.

But even if we limit our discussion to these sources, different scholars still reach different conclusions about Jesus' marital status. So again, how can we determine the truth? We might employ a model known as inference to the best explanation. Simply put, this model says that "the historian should accept the hypothesis that best explains all the evidence."[\[14\]](#) Now admittedly, this isn't an exact science. But as Dr. Craig reminds us, "The goal of historical knowledge is to obtain probability, not mathematical certainty."[\[15\]](#) To demand more than this of history is simply to make unreasonable demands. Even in a court of law, we must be content with proof beyond a reasonable doubt -- not beyond all possible doubt.[\[16\]](#)

Keeping these things in mind, does the evidence best support the hypothesis that Jesus was, or wasn't, married? If you're interested in such a discussion I would highly recommend Darrell Bock's recent book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*. After a careful examination of the evidence, he concludes that Jesus was definitely *not* married – a conclusion shared by the vast majority of New Testament scholars.[\[17\]](#)

Of course, I'm not trying to argue that this issue can be decisively settled by simply citing an authority (although I certainly agree with Dr. Bock's conclusion). My point is rather that we have a way of determining truth in history. By carefully evaluating the best available evidence, and by logically inferring the best explanation of that evidence, we can determine (sometimes with a high degree of probability) what actually happened in the past.

Christianity is a religion rooted in history. Not a history about which we can have no real understanding, but a history that we can know and be confident in believing.

## Notes

1. Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London: SCM, 1947), 91, cited in Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing/Probe Books, 1984), 12.
2. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: SPCK, 1960), vii, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 12.
3. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 77-78.
4. This information comes from Ronald Nash's discussion of Charles Beard's essay, "That Noble Dream," in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 84.
5. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 176.

6. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 85.
7. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), 297, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 88-89.
8. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1953), 8, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 185.
9. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 88.
10. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 186-87.
11. Edwin Yamauchi, "Immanuel Velikovsky's Catastrophic History," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 25 (1973): 134, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 187.
12. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 187.
13. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
14. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 184.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), 31-45. Also see my previous article, "Redeeming The Da Vinci Code," at [probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/](http://probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/).

# The Council of Nicea

*Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#). *

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."[\[1\]](#) So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to " . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah's Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.[\[2\]](#) Another writes, "The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible."[\[3\]](#)

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, "Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son" (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

## **Arius**

Let's look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his



bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."[\[4\]](#) He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."[\[5\]](#)

## Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."[\[6\]](#) It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, "My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . ."[\[7\]](#) This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually

baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine's active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

## **Athanasius**

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly

God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death.”{8} He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief “. . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost.” {9}

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ’s oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

## Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.[{10}](#) Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."[{11}](#)

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

## Notes

1. Grudem, Wayne, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 104.
2. Blomberg, Craig L., & Robinson, Stephen E., *How Wide the Divide*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 128.
3. Bruce McConkie in *Mormonism 101* by Bill McKeever & Eric Johnson (Baker Books, 2000), p. 52.
4. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 135.
5. Ibid.
6. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, p. 118.
7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
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11. Ibid., 60.

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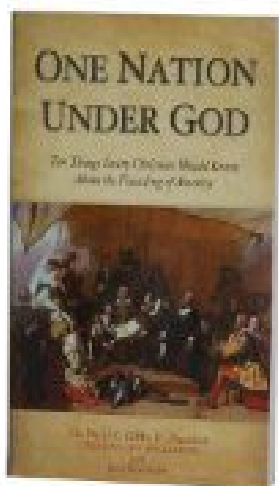
# One Nation Under God

*The Christian influence in American history has been lost. Kerby Anderson provides an overview of nearly 160 years of our nation's founding history by discussing Ten Things Every Christian Should Know About the Founding of America.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## Founders of America: Part One



G.K. Chesterton once said that “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>{1}</sup> We are going to document the origins of this country by looking at a book entitled *One Nation Under God: Ten Things Every Christian Should Know About the Founding of America*.<sup>{2}</sup>

The first thing every Christian should know is that “Christopher Columbus was motivated by his Christian faith to sail to the New World.” One example of this can be found in his writings after he discovered this new land. He wrote, “Therefore let the king and queen, the princes and their most fortunate kingdoms, and all other countries of Christendom

give thanks to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who has bestowed upon us so great a victory and gift. Let religious processions be solemnized; let sacred festivals be given; let the churches be covered with festive garlands. Let Christ rejoice on earth, as he rejoices in heaven, when he foresees coming to salvation so many souls of people hitherto lost.”{3}

The second thing every Christian should know is “The Pilgrims clearly stated that they came to the New World to glorify God and to advance the Christian faith.” It could easily be said that America began with the words, “In the name of God. Amen.” Those were the first words of our nation’s first self-governing document—the Mayflower Compact.

The Pilgrims were Bible-believers who refused to conform to the heretical state Church of England and eventually came to America. Their leader, William Bradford, said “A great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but even as stepping stones unto others for the performing of so great a work.”{4}

Many scholars believe that the initial agreement for self-government, found in the Mayflower Compact, became the cornerstone of the U.S. Constitution. This agreement for self-government, signed on November 11, 1620, created a new government in which they agreed to “covenant and combine” themselves together into a “Body Politick.”

British historian Paul Johnson said, “It is an amazing document . . . . What was remarkable about this particular contract was that it was not between a servant and a master, or a people and a king, but between a group of like-minded individuals and each other, with God as a witness and symbolic co-signatory.”{5}



## Founders of America: Part Two

The third thing every Christian should know is “The Puritans created Bible-based commonwealths in order to practice a representative government that was modeled on their church covenants.” Both the Pilgrims and the Puritans disagreed with many things about the Church of England in their day. But the Pilgrims felt that reforming the church was a hopeless endeavor. They were led to separate themselves from the official church and were often labeled “Separatists.” The Puritans, on the other hand, wanted to reform the Church of England from within. They argued from within for purity of the church. Hence, the name *Puritans*.

At that time, there had been no written constitution in England. The British common law was a mostly oral tradition, articulated as necessary in various written court decisions. The Puritans determined to anchor their liberties on the written page, a tradition taken from the Bible. They created the Body of Liberties which were established on the belief that Christ’s rule is not only given for the church, but also for the state. It contained principles found in the Bible, specifically ninety-eight separate protections of individual rights, including due process of law, trial by a jury of peers, and prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment.

The fourth thing every Christian should know is that “This nation was founded as a sanctuary for religious dissidents.” Roger Williams questioned many of the Puritan laws in Massachusetts, especially the right of magistrates to punish Sabbath-breakers. After he left Massachusetts and founded Rhode Island, he became the first to formulate the concept of “separation of church and state” in America.

Williams said, “The civil magistrate may not intermeddle even to stop a church from apostasy and heresy.”[\[6\]](#) In the 1643 charter for Rhode Island and in all its subsequent charters, Roger Williams established the idea that the state should not

enforce religious opinion.

Another dissident was the Quaker William Penn. He was the main author of the founding governmental document for the land that came to be known as Pennsylvania. This document was called *The Concessions*, and dealt with not only government matters but was also concerned with social, philosophical, scientific, and political matters. By 1680, *The Concessions* had 150 signers, and in the Quaker spirit, this group effort provided for far-reaching liberties never before seen in Anglo-Saxon law.

Paul Johnson said that at the time of America's founding, Philadelphia was "the cultural capital of America." He also points out: "It can be argued, indeed, that Quaker Pennsylvania was the key state in American history. It was the last great flowering of Puritan political innovation, around its great city of brotherly love."[\[7\]](#)

## Education and Religion in America

The fifth thing every Christian should know is that "The education of the settlers and founders of America was uniquely Christian and Bible-based." Education was very important to the founders of this country. One of the laws in Puritan New England was the Old Deluder Act. It was called that because it was intended to defeat Satan, the Old Deluder, who had used illiteracy in the Old World to keep people from reading the Word of God. The New England Primer was used to teach colonial children to read and included the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and the text of many hymns and prayers.

We can also see the importance of education in the rules of many of the first colleges. The Laws and Statutes of Harvard College in 1643 said: "Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies is *to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life* (John 17:3)."[\[8\]](#)

Yale College listed two requirements in its 1745 charter: "All scholars shall live religious, godly, and blameless lives according to the rules of God's Word, diligently reading the Holy Scriptures, the fountain of light and truth; and constantly attend upon all the duties of religion, both in public and secret."[\[9\]](#)

Reverend John Witherspoon was the only active minister who signed the Declaration of Independence. Constitutional scholar John Eidsmoe says, "John Witherspoon is best described as the man who shaped the men who shaped America. Although he did not attend the Constitutional Convention, his influence was multiplied many times over by those who spoke as well as by what was said."[\[10\]](#)

New Jersey elected John Witherspoon to the Continental Congress that drafted the Declaration of Independence. When Congress called for a national day of fasting and prayer on May 17, 1776, John Witherspoon was called upon to preach the sermon. His topic was "The Dominion of Providence over the Affairs of Men."

The sixth thing every Christian should know is that "A religious revival was the key factor in uniting the separate pre- Revolutionary War colonies."

Paul Johnson, author of *A History of the American People*, reports that the Great Awakening may have touched as many as three out of four American colonists.[\[11\]](#) He also points out that this Great Awakening "sounded the death-knell of British colonialism."[\[12\]](#)

As John Adams was to put it afterwards, "The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the mind and hearts of the people: and change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations."

Paul Johnson believes that "The Revolution could not have taken place without this religious background. The essential

difference between the American Revolution and the French Revolution is that the American Revolution, in its origins, was a religious event, whereas the French Revolution was an anti-religious event.”{13}

## **Clergy and Biblical Christianity**

The seventh thing every Christian should know is that “Many of the clergy in the American colonies, members of the Black Regiment, preached liberty.” Much of this took place in so-called “Election Sermons” of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Often the ministers spoke on the subject of civil government in a serious and instructive manner. The sermon was then printed so that every representative had a copy for himself, and so that every minister of the town could have a copy.

John Adams observed, “The Philadelphia ministers thunder and lighten every Sabbath’ against George III’s despotism.”{14} And in speaking of his native Virginia, Thomas Jefferson observed that “pulpit oratory ran like a shock of electricity through the whole colony.”{15}

Some of the most influential preachers include John Witherspoon, Jonathan Mayhew, Samuel West, and Reverend John Peter Muhlenberg. Reverend Mayhew, for example, preached a message entitled “Concerning Unlimited Submission to the Higher Powers, to the Council and House of Representatives in Colonial New England.” He said, “It is hoped that but few will think the subject of it an improper one to be discoursed on in the pulpit, under a notion that this is preaching politics, instead of Christ. However, to remove all prejudices of this sort, I beg it may be remembered that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.’ Why, then, should not those parts of Scripture which related to civil government be examined and explained from the desk, as well as others?”{16}

The eighth thing every Christian should know is that “Biblical Christianity was the driving force behind the key leaders of the American Revolution.”

In 1772, Samuel Adams created a “Committee of Correspondence” in Boston, in order to keep in touch with his fellow Americans up and down the coast. Historian George Bancroft called Sam Adams, “the last of the Puritans.”[\[17\]](#) His biographer, John C. Miller, says that Samuel Adams cannot be understood without considering the lasting impact Whitefield’s preaching at Harvard during the Great Awakening had on him.[\[18\]](#) Adams had been telling his countrymen for years that America had to take her stand against tyranny. He regarded individual freedom as “the law of the Creator” and a Christian right documented in the New Testament.[\[19\]](#) As the Declaration was being signed, Sam Adams said, “We have this day restored the Sovereign to Whom all men ought to be obedient. He reigns in heaven and from the rising to the setting of the sun, let His kingdom come.”

## The Founding Documents

The ninth thing every Christian should know is that “Christianity played a significant role in the development of our nation’s birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence.” For example, the Presbyterian Elders of North Carolina drafted the Mecklenburg Declaration in May 1775 under the direction of Elder Ephraim Brevard (a graduate of Princeton). One scholar says “In correcting his first draft of the Declaration it can be seen, in at least a few places, that Jefferson has erased the original words and inserted those which are first found in the Mecklenburg Declaration. No one can doubt that Jefferson had Brevard’s resolutions before him when he was writing his immortal Declaration.”[\[20\]](#)

The relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is crucial. The Declaration is the “why” of American government, while the Constitution is the “how.”

Another influence on the Declaration was George Mason's "Virginia Declaration of Rights." Notice how similar it sounds to the Declaration: "That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

Paul Johnson says, "There is no question that the Declaration of Independence was, to those who signed it, a religious as well as secular act, and that the Revolutionary War had the approbation of divine providence. They had won it with God's blessing and afterwards, they drew up their framework of government with God's blessing, just as in the seventeenth century the colonists had drawn up their Compacts and Charters and Orders and Instruments, with God peering over their shoulders."[\[21\]](#)

The tenth thing every Christian should know is that "The Biblical understanding of the sinfulness of man was the guiding principle behind the United States Constitution." John Eidsmoe says, "Although Witherspoon derived the concept of separation of powers from other sources, such as Montesquieu, checks and balances seem to have been his own unique contribution to the foundation of U.S. Government."[\[22\]](#) He adds, "One thing is certain: the Christian religion, particularly Rev. Witherspoon's Calvinism, which emphasized the fallen nature of man, influenced Madison's view of law and government."[\[23\]](#)

## Notes

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4. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 1620-1647, edited and updated by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 25.

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7. Johnson, 66.

8. Rules for Harvard University, 1643, from "New England's First Fruits," *The Annals of America*, Vol. 1, 176.

9. Regulations at Yale College, 1745, from "New England's First Fruits," *The Annals of America*, Vol. 1, 464.

10. John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), 81.

11. Johnson, 115.

12. Ibid., 307.

13. Ibid., 116-117.

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15. Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography*, January 6, 1821.

16. Jonathan Mayhew, to the Council and House of Representatives in Colonial New England, 1749.

17. Bancroft, *History*, Vol. III, 77.

18. John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1936/1960), 85, quoted in Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, 248.

19. Robert Flood, *Men Who Shaped America* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 35-36.

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# Fahrenheit 9/11

## Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*

Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore's new documentary, has been raising much concern since its mid-summer release from a number of groups. These groups represent a large demographic, and no one appears to be lukewarm to the film; people either love it or hate it. Rated "R" for scenes from the Iraq war, and a split second clip showing the execution of a prisoner by the government of Saudi Arabia, *Fahrenheit* is an exercise in cut-and-paste film making that poses as a traditional documentary, but is really a thinly veiled and vehement anti-Bush propaganda piece.

The film won the Palme de'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival, the first documentary film to ever capture the prize. A quick survey of some of the films in the past that have received the award, (among them Orson Welles' *Othello*, Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* to name just a few) raises the question of what makes this particular work worthy of one of the most coveted honors in cinema. I have been professionally involved in film criticism for almost ten years, and this is one of the worst documentaries I have ever seen. Moore's film is undeserving of a place among these heavyweights, but we appear to be in a time when anything that bashes America, its perceived imperialism, or the Bush administration, is not only good, but is something to be revered.

The film begins with the 2000 presidential election and the efforts to decide if Bush or Gore won. Moore claims in his



film that several investigations uncovered the fact that Gore actually won. However, he fails to give us the sources of those “investigations.” He does not acknowledge that newspapers as credible as the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* declared that Bush won the electoral vote, even if he did not win the popular vote (it should be kept in mind that the final count on the popular vote may never actually be known). The film plays to all of those who believe that Bush “stole” the election, and ignores the fact that the Supreme Court awarded Bush the election after law suits from both parties were settled.

Moore then directs the viewer’s attention to the House of Saud. In this segment, Moore concentrates his energies on the connection between the Bush administration and the Royal Saudi family. He equates being involved with the Royal Family as being involved with terrorists. Moore groups all of the people from a certain ethnic group into one neat category, and maintains that association with that group is wrong. This is just an introduction to Moore’s casual handling of facts that will follow in the rest of the film.

## **President Bush on September 11**

The continuing enthusiasm for Moore’s “documentary” needs to be examined in the light of the misinformation, poor research, and disregard for the facts that constitute the main body of the film. Dave Kopel has written an excellent review of the film titled “Fifty-nine Deceits in *Fahrenheit 9/11*” that can be found at [www.davekopel.com](http://www.davekopel.com). It is a forty-page exposition with detailed information concerning the specific factual errors found throughout Moore’s film, and is the basis of much of the information summarized in the four or five points we will consider.

In one of the early scenes in the film, President Bush is

shown reading from the book *My Pet Goat* to an assembly of elementary school children after he had already received the news that the September 11 attacks were occurring (actually it was a chapter from *Reading Mastery 2* that Bush was reading to the children). Moore's voice-over, a technique that is uniformly suspicious with film makers as an indication of a poor film that needs rescuing or explaining to its audience, suggests that Bush sits quietly in a state of bewilderment wondering what he should do. The insinuation is that Bush is an incompetent and unprepared leader who has been dumfounded by the surprise attack. Moore goes on to say that Bush clearly did the wrong thing, and that he should have been prompted into action immediately.

Moore does not suggest what the president should have done; he merely derides his hesitation after hearing the news. Moore also leaves out the fact that the principle of the school, Gwendolyn Tose-Rigell, gave Bush high praise for his calm handling of the situation saying, "I do not think anyone could have handled the situation better." This praise came from someone who understands that children are easily alarmed and in this instance needed a calming voice from someone in charge.

Moore belittles the president for being dumbstruck by the attack. The insinuation is that a better leader would have taken control of the situation and rushed into action to address the emergency. One could easily view the same clip and come to the conclusion that here was a man who was extremely disturbed by what he knew, and realized that all of the forces of American intelligence from the FBI, the CIA, and certainly the Pentagon were being called into immediate action, and that there was little that could be accomplished by rushing out of the room. What this segment of the film does is merely make fun of the president's facial expressions, and, in effect, for not stirring the young children, their parents, and the nation into a state of panic.

## The Saudi Connection

Let's turn next to the relationship between President Bush and Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia. Moore attempts to make a case that the Bush family is in a cozy and financially beneficial relationship with prince Bandar, and that this relationship could not help but interfere with United States' interest, especially during a crisis on the scale of the 9/11 attacks.

This claim or insinuation fails to point out that Prince Bandar has participated in a bipartisan relationship with both parties in Washington for decades. Elsa Walsh, in an article in *The New Yorker* magazine from March 24, 2003, gives a detailed account of former president Bill Clinton frequently turning to Prince Bandar for advice on Middle East agendas. She goes on to show how Bandar has become an "indispensable operator" for both parties.

Moore is either unaware or willfully omitting the relationship concerning Clinton's former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Wyche Fowler, whose present job is chairman of The Middle East Institute. This institute is heavily supported by the Saudis, who have secretly donated over \$1 million to the Clinton Library. The point in citing the Clinton administration's involvement with the Bandar family is not to absolve the Bush family of any wrongdoing, if in fact there is anything wrong. The issue is that if one administration is wrong in cooperating with the Prince, then both administrations are wrong. What is far more likely is that Prince Bandar is a necessary ally and advisor to the United States regardless of which party is in power. Moore is hypocritical to ignore such connections, and this is a prime example of what one finds throughout the film.

By mentioning Prince Bandar repeatedly in association with oil money, Moore takes the viewers so far down a path of conjecture that many will draw the conclusion that the Bush administration's foreign policy does not have the United

States' interest as a top priority. However, there may be some good that can come out of this if the viewer comes away with a concern about our nation's dependence on foreign oil. At present it is very difficult for candidates at almost any level to get elected if they run on a platform that appears to threaten American's supply of cheap oil and petroleum products. Therefore, Moore is correct in making the connection that American foreign policy may be overly dependent on Saudi interests. However, it is misleading at best to suggest that Saudi influence only occurs when Republicans are in office, and ignores the fact that both parties are influenced by Bandar and Saudi Arabia.

### **A Cavalier President?**

Moore charges President Bush for being on vacation forty-two percent of the time during his first eight months as president. The calculation used to arrive at the number forty-two would be interesting in and of itself, but the fact that Moore ignores the concept of the "working vacation," or the fact that most presidencies could not fare well if they were subjected to such a calculation, is again very misleading.

In his article "Just the facts of *Fahrenheit 9/11*", [\[1\]](#) Tom McNamee exposes what may have been the source for Moore's forty-two percent figure. McNamee points out that of the fifty-four days Moore cites when Bush was at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, weekends were also included; a fact that Moore fails to point out. Another interesting source is Mike Allen's article in the *Washington Post*. [\[2\]](#) Allen notes that Camp David stays have traditionally been used for meetings with foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, and other heads of state, and are routinely reported on cable and network newscasts as work. This alone should be enough to raise a cautionary flag for viewers of the film. Moore is playing fast

and lose with the facts, never giving Bush the benefit of the doubt or pointing out that many of Bush's so-called sins are standard behavior for any administration regardless of the party in power.

Moore continues the slanted montage of images with shots showing Bush relaxing at Camp David, working on his Crawford ranch, and driving golf balls while lightheartedly responding to questions from reporters. The implication Moore wants the viewer to draw is that the leader of the free world is more concerned about his golf game than fighting terrorism and doing his job. The following Tuesday this clip was clarified by Brit Hume and Brian Wilson on the Fox News Channel. They reported that Bush was answering a question concerning an attack carried out by Israel in response to a Palestinian suicide bomber.

Moore evidently does not see the hypocrisy of failing to mention president Clinton hitting golf balls on the White House lawn moments after learning that Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had been shot, and not knowing whether he would live or die.

Again, this is another example of how Moore is throwing together film clips, adding a voice over, and leading the audience astray. If this film were part of a graduate or doctoral research project of any form the candidate would be failed outright for false and misleading research and for failure to check his sources. Additionally, any reputable news organization making such a case would probably be sued for libel and slander.

### ***Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Current Crisis**

In this writer's opinion, it would be overly generous to just dismiss the film as composed of half-truths and misinformation. The film is not only a poor documentary

undeserving of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival's highest honor, the Palm d'Or, but a potentially dangerous movie that may not be advantageous to our troops in Iraq.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is at best a propaganda piece that potentially played into the hands of al Qaeda, Saddam loyalists, and the coalition enemy operatives and terrorists who continue to back Saddam Hussein and are presently killing American soldiers and targeting United States interests around the world. In his own words found at MichaelMoore.com, April 14, 2004, he said: "The Iraqis who have risen up against the occupation are not insurgents' or terrorists' or The Enemy.' They are the REVOLUTION, the Minutemen, and their numbers will grow – and they will win."[\[3\]](#)

It is irresponsible to call Iraqis "freedom fighters" who have opposed themselves to a free democratic nation that is sacrificing its sons and daughters so that others might live without the threat of a totalitarian dictator who kills his own people. Moore maintains that he is deeply concerned about American troops, but also lauds the efforts of the enemy insurgents who are killing those troops. One cannot have it both ways and remain rationally consistent.

Several efforts are presently underway to begin distribution of *Fahrenheit 9/11* through Middle East distributors. Hezbollah, a known terrorist organization, is assisting *Front Row* distributors in the promotion of Moore's film. Additionally, Nancy Tartaglione in *Screen Daily.com* (June 9th, 2004) and Salon.com both reported that *Fahrenheit* will be the first commercially released documentary in the Middle East, opening in both Lebanon and Syria soon (Syria is presently on the United States list of terrorist states). It could easily be argued that Moore is indirectly getting rich from the approval and support of known terrorist groups and enemies of the United States.

Our country is a stronger and better place because of the

freedom of speech we enjoy, and Moore in some ways represents a long tradition of vocal and organized opposition to the wars and policies of our government. He does have a right to be heard, and one should not avoid the film just because he or she has a preconceived notion of its message. *Fahrenheit 9/11* may prove to be a very important piece of propaganda, both in this election year and in the future. It could also be very important that there are people out there who have seen the film and can offer reasoned critiques to those who might otherwise be lead astray by this controversial and misleading documentary.

## Notes

1. Tom McNamee, "Just the facts on 'Fahrenheit 9/11' *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 28, 2004.
2. Mike Allen, "White House On the Range. Bush Retreats to Ranch for 'Working Vacation'," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2001.
3. <http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/message/index.php?messageDate=2004-04-14>

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# The Declaration and Constitution: Their Christian

# Roots

## The Declaration of Independence

Many are unaware of the writings and documents that preceded these great works and the influence of biblical ideas in their formation. In the first two sections of this article, I would like to examine the Declaration of Independence. Following this, we'll look at the Constitution.

On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee introduced a resolution to the Continental Congress calling for a formal declaration of independence. However, even at that late date, there was significant opposition to the resolution. So, Congress recessed for three weeks to allow delegates to return home and discuss the proposition with their constituents while a committee was appointed to express the Congressional sentiments. The task of composing the Declaration fell to Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson's initial draft left God out of the manuscript entirely except for a vague reference to "the laws of nature and of nature's God." Yet, even this phrase makes an implicit reference to the laws of God.

The phrase "laws of nature" had a fixed meaning in 18th century England and America. It was a direct reference to the laws of God in a created order as described in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government* and William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.

What Jefferson was content to leave implicit, however, was made more explicit by the other members of the committee. They changed the language to read that all men are "endowed by their Creator" with these rights. Later, the Continental Congress added phrases which further reflected a theistic perspective. For example, they added that they were "appealing



to the Supreme Judge of the World for the rectitude of our intentions” and that they were placing “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence.”

The Declaration was not drafted in an intellectual vacuum, nor did the ideas contained in it suddenly spring from the minds of a few men. Instead, the founders built their framework upon a Reformation foundation laid by such men as Samuel Rutherford and later incorporated by John Locke.

Rutherford wrote his book *Lex Rex* in 1644 to refute the idea of the divine right of kings. *Lex Rex* established two crucial principles. First, there should be a covenant or constitution between the ruler and the people. Second, since all men are sinners, no man is superior to another. These twin principles of liberty and equality are also found in John Locke’s writings.

## **John Locke and the Origin of the Declaration**

Although the phrasing of the Declaration certainly follows the pattern of John Locke, Jefferson also gave credit to the writer Algernon Sidney, who in turn cites most prominently Aristotle, Plato, Roman republican writers, and the Old Testament.

Legal scholar Gary Amos argues that Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government* is simply Samuel Rutherford’s *Lex Rex* in a popularized form. Amos says in his book *Defending the Declaration*,

*Locke explained that the “law of nature” is God’s general revelation of law in creation, which God also supernaturally writes on the hearts of men. Locke drew the idea from the New Testament in Romans 1 and 2. In contrast, he spoke of the “law of God” or the “positive law of God” as God’s eternal*

*moral law specially revealed and published in Scripture.*[{1}](#)

This foundation helps explain the tempered nature of the American Revolution. The Declaration of Independence was a bold document, but not a radical one. The colonists did not break with England for “light and transient causes.” They were mindful that they should be “in subjection to the governing authorities” which “are established by God” (Romans 13:1). Yet when they suffered from a “long train of abuses and usurpations,” they argued that “it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government.”

The Declaration also borrowed from state constitutions that already existed at the time. In fact, the phraseology of the Declaration greatly resembles the preamble to the Virginia Constitution, adopted in June 1776. The body of the Declaration consists of twenty-eight charges against the king justifying the break with Britain. All but four are from state constitutions.[{2}](#)

Jefferson no doubt drew from George Mason’s Declaration of Rights (published on June 6, 1776). The first paragraph states that “all men are born equally free and independent and have certain inherent natural Rights; among which are the Enjoyment of Life and Liberty, with the Means of Acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining Happiness and Safety.” Mason also argued that when any government is found unworthy of the trust placed in it, a majority of the community “hath an indubitable, inalienable, and indefensible Right to Reform, alter, or abolish it.”

## **Constitution and Human Nature**

The influence of the Bible on the Constitution was profound but often not appreciated by secular historians and political theorists. Two decades ago, Constitutional scholars and political historians (including one of my professors at

Georgetown University) assembled 15,000 writings from the Founding Era (1760-1805). They counted 3154 citations in these writings, and found that the book most frequently cited in that literature was the Bible. The writers from the Founding Era quoted from the Bible 34 percent of the time. Even more interesting was that about three-fourths of all references to the Bible came from reprinted sermons from that era.[\[3\]](#)

Professor M.E. Bradford shows in his book, *A Worthy Company*, that fifty of the fifty-five men who signed the Constitution were church members who endorsed the Christian faith.[\[4\]](#)

The Bible and biblical principles were important in the framing of the Constitution. In particular, the framers started with a biblical view of human nature. James Madison argued in *Federalist* #51 that government must be based upon a realistic view of human nature.

*But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.*[\[5\]](#)

Framing a republic requires a balance of power that liberates human dignity and rationality and controls human sin and depravity.

*As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.*[\[6\]](#)

A Christian view of government is based upon a balanced view of human nature. It recognizes both human dignity (we are created in God's image) and human depravity (we are sinful individuals). Because both grace and sin operate in government, we should neither be too optimistic nor too pessimistic. Instead, the framers constructed a government with a deep sense of biblical realism.

## **Constitution and Majority Tyranny**

James Madison in defending the Constitution divided the problem of tyranny into two broad categories: majority tyranny (addressed in *Federalist* #10) and governmental tyranny (addressed in *Federalist* #47-51).

Madison concluded from his study of governments that they were destroyed by factions. He believed this factionalism was due to "the propensity of mankind, to fall into mutual animosities" (*Federalist* #10) which he believed were "sown in the nature of man." Government, he concluded, must be based upon a more realistic view which also accounts for this sinful side of human nature.

A year before the Constitutional Convention, George Washington wrote to John Jay that, "We have, probably, had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our federation." From now on, he added, "We must take human nature as we find it."

Madison's solution to majority tyranny was the term *extended republic*. His term for the solution to governmental tyranny was *compound republic*. He believed that an extended republic with a greater number of citizens would prevent factions from easily taking control of government. He also believed that elections would serve to filter upward men of greater virtue.

Madison's solution to governmental tyranny can be found in *Federalist* #47-51. These include separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism.

Madison realized the futility of trying to remove passions (human sinfulness) from the population. Therefore, he proposed that human nature be set against human nature. This was done by separating various institutional power structures. First, the church was separated from the state so that ecclesiastical functions and governmental functions would not interfere with religious and political liberty. Second, the federal government was divided into three equal branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. Third, the federal government was delegated certain powers while the rest of the powers resided in the state governments.

Each branch was given separate but rival powers, thus preventing the possibility of concentrating power into the hands of a few. Each branch had certain checks over the other branches so that there was a distribution and balance of power. The effect of this system was to allow ambition and power to control itself. As each branch is given power, it provides a check on the other branch. This is what has often been referred to as the concept of “countervailing ambitions.”

## **Constitution and Governmental Tyranny**

James Madison’s solution to governmental tyranny includes both federalism as well as the separation of powers. Federalism can be found at the very heart of the United States Constitution. In fact, without federalism, there was no practical reason for the framers to abandon the Articles of Confederation and draft the Constitution.

Federalism comes from *foedus*, Latin for covenant. “The tribes of Israel shared a covenant that made them a nation. American federalism originated at least in part in the dissenting Protestants’ familiarity with the Bible.”[\[7\]](#)

The separation of powers allows each branch of government to provide a check on the other. According to Madison, the

Constitution provides a framework of supplying “opposite and rival interests” (*Federalist* #51) through a series of checks and balances. This theory of “countervailing ambition” both prevented tyranny and provided liberty. It was a system in which bad people could do least harm and good people had the freedom to do good works.

For example, the executive branch cannot take over the government and rule at its whim because the legislative branch has been given the power of the purse. Congress must approve or disapprove budgets for governmental programs. A President cannot wage war if the Congress does not appropriate money for its execution.

Likewise, the legislative branch is also controlled by this structure of government. It can pass legislation, but it always faces the threat of presidential veto and judicial oversight. Since the executive branch is responsible for the execution of legislation, the legislature cannot exercise complete control over the government. Undergirding all of this is the authority of the ballot box.

Each of these checks was motivated by a healthy fear of human nature. The founders believed in human responsibility and human dignity, but they did not trust human nature too much. Their solution was to separate powers and invest each branch with rival powers.

Biblical ideas were crucial in both the Declaration and the Constitution. Nearly 80 percent of the political pamphlets published during the 1770s were reprinted sermons. As one political science professor put it: “When reading comprehensively in the political literature of the war years, one cannot but be struck by the extent to which biblical sources used by ministers and traditional Whigs undergirded the justification for the break with Britain, the rationale for continuing the war, and the basic principles of Americans’ writing their own constitutions.”[\[8\]](#)

## Notes

1. Gary Amos, *Defending the Declaration* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1989), 57.
2. Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988, 114.
3. Ibid., 140.
4. M.E. Bradford, *A Worthy Company: Brief Lives of the Framers of the United States Constitution* (Marlborough, NH: Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1982).
5. James Madison, *Federalist*, #51 (New York: New American Library, 1961), 322.
6. Ibid., *Federalist* #55, 346.
7. Lutz, *Origins*, 43,
8. Ibid., 142.

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# Slavery in America – How Did the Founders and Early Christians Regard It?

*Kerby Anderson presents a thoughtful review of the attitude towards slavery held by many of our founders and early Christian leaders. Although a tragic chapter in our history, he encourages us to understand that many opposed slavery from the beginning believing that all men are in fact created equal.*

## Introduction

Slavery has been found throughout the history of the world.

Most of the major empires in the world enslaved millions. They made slaves not only of their citizens but of people in the countries they conquered.

Slavery is also a sad and tragic chapter in American history that we must confront honestly. Unfortunately, that is often not how it is done. History classes frequently teach that the founders and framers were evil men and hypocrites. Therefore, we no longer need to study them, nor do we need to study the principles they established in founding this country and framing the Constitution.

In fact, I have met many students in high school and college who have no interest in learning about the founders of this country and the framers of the Constitution merely because some were slaveholders. But I have also found that they do not know the whole story of the struggle over slavery in this country.

In reaction to this secular revisionist teaching in the public schools and universities, a Christian perspective has been offered that does not square with history. Some Christians, wanting to emphasize the biblical principles of the founding of this country, seem to have turned a blind eye to the evil of slavery. Slavery was wrong and represented an incomplete founding of liberty in this country.

In this article we will look at slavery in America and attempt to tell the story fairly and honestly. At the same time, we will bring forth facts and stories that have been lost from the current revisionist teaching on slavery.

First, let's put slavery in America in historical perspective. Historians estimate that approximately 11 million Africans were transported to the New World. Of these 4 million went to Brazil, 2.5 million to Spanish colonies, 2 million to the British West Indies, and 500,000 to the United States.

Although it is sometimes taught that the founders did not



believe that blacks were human or deserved the same rights as whites, this is not true. Actually, the founders believed that blacks had the same inalienable rights as other persons in America. James Otis of Massachusetts said in 1764 that “The colonists are by the law of nature freeborn, as indeed all men are, white or black.”[\[1\]](#)

Alexander Hamilton also talked about the equality of blacks with whites. He said, “their natural faculties are probably as good as ours. . . . The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks, makes us fancy many things that are founded neither in reason nor experience.”[\[2\]](#)

As we will see, many worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery and wanted a society that truly practiced the belief that “all men are created equal.”

## **The Founders’ View of Slavery**

Let’s see what the founders and framers really thought about slavery and what they did to bring about its end. Here are a few of their comments.

Slavery was often condemned from the pulpits of America as revolutionary preachers frequently spoke out against it. One patriot preacher said, “The Deity hath bestowed upon them and us the same natural rights as men.”[\[3\]](#)

Benjamin Franklin said that slavery “is an atrocious debasement of human nature.”[\[4\]](#) He and Benjamin Rush went on to found the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Benjamin Rush’s desire to abolish slavery was based on biblical principles. He stated: “Domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity.” He went on to say, “It is rebellion again the authority of a common Father. It is a practical denial of the extent and efficacy of the death of a

common Savior. It is an usurpation of the prerogative of the great Sovereign of the universe who has solemnly claimed an exclusive property in the souls of men.”{5}

John Adams said, “Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States . . . . I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in . . . abhorrence.”{6}

James Madison in his speech before the Constitutional Convention said, “We have seen the mere distinction of colour made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.”{7}

During the American Revolution, many slaves won their freedom. Alexander Hamilton served on George Washington’s staff and supported the plan to enlist slaves in the army. He wrote to John Jay that “An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets . . . for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men.”{8} Blacks from every part of the country (except South Carolina and Georgia) won their freedom through military service.{9}

After the Revolution, many Americans who were enjoying new freedom from England were struck by the contradiction that many blacks were still enslaved. John Jay said “That men should pray and fight for their own freedom and yet keep others in slavery is certainly acting a very inconsistent as well as unjust and perhaps impious part.”{10}

In *Federalist* #54, James Madison stated that Southern laws (not nature) have “degraded [the slaves] from the human rank” depriving them of “rights” including the right to vote, that they would otherwise possess equally with other human beings. Madison argued that it was a “barbarous policy” to view blacks “in the unnatural light of property” rather than persons entitled to the same rights as other men.

# Slavery and the Founders

When America was founded, there were about half a million slaves. Approximately one third of the founders had slaves (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson being the most notable). Most of the slaves lived in the five southern colonies.

Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin (both signers of the Declaration of Independence) founded the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1774. Rush went on to head a national abolition movement.

John Jay was the president of a similar society in New York. He said: "To contend for our own liberty, and to deny that blessing to others, involves an inconsistency not to be excused." John Adams opposed slavery because it was a "foul contagion in the human character" and "an evil of colossal magnitude." His son, John Quincy Adams, so crusaded against slavery that he was known as "the hell-hound of abolition."

It's important to note that when these anti-slavery societies were founded, they were clearly an act of civil disobedience. In 1774, for example, Pennsylvania passed a law to end slavery. But King George vetoed that law and other laws passed by the colonies. The King was pro-slavery, and Great Britain (at that time) practiced slavery. As long as the colonies were part of the British Empire, they would also be required to permit slavery.

When Thomas Jefferson finished his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, it included a paragraph condemning the King for introducing slavery into the colonies and continuing the slave trade. It said: "He [King George] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur

miserable death in their transportation thither.” Unfortunately, this paragraph was dropped from the final draft because it was offensive to the delegates from Georgia and South Carolina.

After America separated from Great Britain, several states passed laws abolishing slavery. For example, Vermont’s 1777 constitution abolished slavery outright. Pennsylvania passed a law in 1779 for gradual emancipation. Slavery was abolished in Massachusetts and New Hampshire through a series of court decisions in the 1780s that ruled that “all men are born free and equal.” Other states passed gradual abolition laws during this period as well. By the time of the U.S. Constitution, every state (except Georgia) had at least prohibited slavery or suspended the importation of slaves.

Most of the founders (including many who at the time owned slaves) wanted to abolish the slave trade, but could not do so at the founding of this country. So, what about the compromises concerning slavery in the Constitution? We will look at that topic next.

## **Slavery and the Framers**

We have noted that some of the founders were slaveholders. Yet even so, many of them wanted to abolish slavery. One example was George Washington.

In 1786, Washington wrote to Robert Morris that “there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery].”[\[11\]](#) Later in his life he freed several of his household slaves and decreed in his will that his slaves would become free upon the death of his wife. Washington’s estate even paid for their care until 1833.

What about the compromises in the U.S. Constitution? When the delegates came to Philadelphia, there were strong regional

differences between northern and southern states concerning slavery.[\[12\]](#)

The first compromise concerned enumeration. Apportionment of representatives would be determined by the number of free persons and three-fifths of all other persons. Many see this as saying that blacks were not considered whole persons. Actually, it was just the opposite. The anti-slavery delegates wanted to count slaves as less in order to penalize slaveholders and reduce their influence in Congress. Free blacks were considered free persons and counted accordingly.

The second compromise dealt with the slave trade. Congress was prohibited until 1808 from blocking the migration and importation of slaves. It did not prevent states from restricting or outlawing the slave trade. As I pointed out previously, many had already done so. It did establish a temporary exemption to the federal government until President Jefferson signed a national prohibition into law effective January 1, 1808.

A final compromise involved fugitive slaves that guaranteed return of slaves held to service or labor "under the laws thereof." The wording did not imply that the Constitution recognized slavery as legitimate but only acknowledged that states had laws governing slavery.

It is notable that the words "slave" and "slavery" cannot be found in the U.S. Constitution. James Madison recorded in his notes on the constitutional convention that the delegates "thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men."

Slavery was wrong, and it is incorrect to say that the U.S. Constitution supported it. Frederick Douglas believed that our form of government "was never, in its essence, anything but an anti-slavery government." He argued, "Abolish slavery tomorrow, and not a sentence or a syllable of the Constitution

need be altered.”

Nevertheless, the seeds of a future conflict were sown in these compromises. The nation was founded on the ideal that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” John Quincy Adams later admitted that: “The inconsistency of the institution of slavery with the principles of the Declaration of Independence was seen and lamented.” The conflict eventually broke out into a great civil war.

## **The Bible and Slavery**

How does the Bible relate to slavery in America? While it is true that so many of the leaders in the abolition movement were Christians, there were others who attempted to use their particular interpretation of the Bible to justify slavery. That should not be surprising since today we see people trying to manipulate the Bible to justify their beliefs about issues like abortion and homosexuality.

The Bible teaches that slavery, as well as other forms of domination of one person over another, is wrong. For example, Joseph was sold into slavery (Genesis 37), and the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites (Exodus 1). Neither these nor other descriptions of slavery in the Bible are presented in a favorable light.

The Old Testament law code made it a capital crime to kidnap a person and sell him into slavery (Ex. 21:16). It also commanded Israel to welcome a slave who escaped from his master and not be returned (Deut. 23:15-16).

Nevertheless, some pointed to other passages in the Old Testament to try to justify slavery. For example, those who needed financial assistance or needed protection could become indentured servants (Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18). But this was a voluntary act very different from the way slavery was

practiced in America. Also, a thief that could not or would not make restitution could be sold as a slave (Ex. 22:1-3), but the servitude would cease when restitution had been made.

In the New Testament, we see that Paul wrote how slaves (and masters) were to act toward one another (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25, 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2). Since nearly half of the population of Rome were slaves, it is understandable that he would address their attitudes and actions. Paul was hardly endorsing the Roman system of slavery.

Paul's letter to Philemon encouraged him to welcome back his slave Onesimus (who had now become a Christian). Christian tradition says that the slave owner did welcome him back as a Christian brother and gave him his freedom. Onesimus later became the bishop of Berea.

It is also true that many of the leaders of the abolition movement were Christians who worked to abolish slavery from America. Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, and Charles Finney are just a few of the 19th century leaders of the abolition movement. Finney, for example, not only preached salvation but called for the elimination of slavery. He said, "I had made up my mind on the question of slavery, and was exceedingly anxious to arouse public attention to the subject. In my prayers and preaching, I so often alluded to slavery, and denounced it."[\[13\]](#)

Slavery is a sad and tragic chapter in American history, and we must confront it honestly. But the way the subject of slavery is taught in America's classrooms today often leaves out many important facts. I encourage you to study more about this nation's history. Our founders have much to teach us about history, government, and morality.

## Notes

1. *Rights of the Colonies* in Bernard Bailyn, ed. *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 439.
2. Alexander Hamilton writing to John Jay, March 14, 1779 in Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, eds. *The Founders' Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), I:527.
3. Samuel Stillman, *The Duty of Magistrates* (1779) in Frank Moore, ed., *Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* (New York: Charles T. Evans, 1892), 285.
4. "An Address to the Public from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition Slavery" in J.A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Benjamin Franklin, Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1154.
5. Benjamin Rush, *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States Assembled at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Zachariah Poulson, 1794), 24.
6. John Adams to Robert J. Evans, June 8, 1819, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1946), 209.
7. Speech at Constitutional Convention, June 6, 1787 in Max Farrand, ed., *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven: Yale University, 1937), 1:135.
8. Hamilton, in Kurland and Lerner, eds., *The Founders' Constitution*, I:527.
9. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961).
10. John Jay writing to Richard Price, September 27, 1785 in *The Founders' Constitution*, 538.
11. Letter of April 12, 1786, in W. B. Allen, ed., *George Washington: A Collection* (Indianapolis: Library Classics, 1989), 319.
12. Matthew Spalding, *The Founders' Almanac* (Washington, DC: Heritage, 2002), 285-6.
13. Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs* (New York: A.S. Barnes,



1876), 324.

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