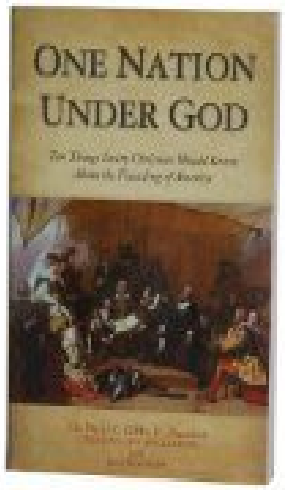
One Nation Under God

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."{1} 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*.{2}

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

1. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922).
2. David C. Gibbs and Jerry Newcombe, *One Nation Under God: Ten Things Every Christian Should Know About the Founding of*

America (Seminole, FL: Christian Law Association, 2003).
3. Christopher Columbus, Journal, 1492, quoted in Federer, United States Folder, *Library of Classics.*
4. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 1620-1647, edited and updated by Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 25.
5. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 29-30.
6. George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, From the Discovery of the Continent* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1890), Vol. I, 250.
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.
14. Derek Davis, "Jesus vs. the Watchmaker," *Christian History,* May 1996, 35.
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.
20. N. S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1882), 85-88.
21. Johnson, 204-205.
22. Eidsmoe, 89.
23. Ibid., 101.

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