

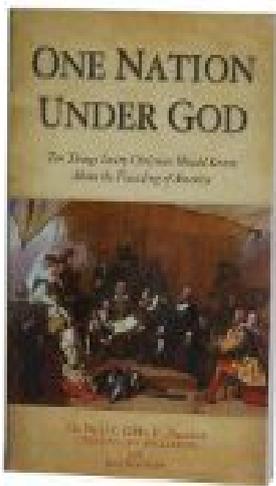
One Nation Under God

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

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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.
 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.
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 21. Johnson, 204-205.
 22. Eidsmoe, 89.
 23. Ibid., 101.

American Government and Christianity – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson looks at how a Christian, biblical framework operated as a critical force in establishing our constitution and governmental system. The founders views on the nature of man and the role of government were derived from their biblical foundation.

America's Christian Roots

The founding of this country as well as the framing of the key political documents rests upon a Christian foundation. That doesn't necessarily mean that the United States is a Christian nation, although some framers used that term. But it does mean that the foundations of this republic presuppose a Christian view of human nature and God's providence.

In previous articles we have discussed "The Christian Roots of the Declaration and Constitution" [on the Web as ["The Declaration and the Constitution: Their Christian Roots"](#)] and provided an overview of the books [On Two Wings](#) and [One Nation Under God](#). Our focus in this article will be to pull together many of the themes of these resources and combine them with additional facts and quotes from the founders.

First, what was the perspective of the founders of America? Consider some of these famous quotes.

John Adams was the second president of the United States. He

saw the need for religious values to provide the moral base line for society. He stated in a letter to the officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.[{1}](#)

In fact, John Adams wasn't the only founding father to talk about the importance of religious values. Consider this statement from George Washington during his Farewell Address:

And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.[{2}](#)

Two hundred years after the establishment of the Plymouth colony in 1620, Americans gathered at that site to celebrate its bicentennial. Daniel Webster was the speaker at this 1820 celebration. He reminded those in attendance of this nation's origins:

Let us not forget the religious character of our origin. Our fathers were brought hither by their high veneration for the Christian religion. They journeyed by its light, and labored in its hope. They sought to incorporate its principles with the elements of their society, and to diffuse its influence through all their institutions, civil, political, or literary.[{3}](#)

Religion, and especially the Christian religion, was an important foundation to this republic.

Christian Character

It is clear that the framers of this new government believed that the people should elect and support leaders with character and integrity. George Washington expressed this in his Farewell Address when he said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports."

Benjamin Rush talked about the religious foundation of the republic that demanded virtuous leadership. He said that, "the only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid on the foundation of religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments." [{4}](#)

He went on to explain that

A Christian cannot fail of being a republican . . . for every precept of the Gospel inculcates those degrees of humility, self-denial, and brotherly kindness which are directly opposed to the pride of monarchy. . . . A Christian cannot fail of being useful to the republic, for his religion teaches him that no man "liveth to himself." And lastly a Christian cannot fail of being wholly inoffensive, for his religion teaches him in all things to do to others what he would wish, in like circumstances, they should do to him. [{5}](#)

Daniel Webster understood the importance of religion, and especially the Christian religion, in this form of government. In his famous Plymouth Rock speech of 1820 he said,

Lastly, our ancestors established their system of government on morality and religious sentiment. Moral habits, they

believed, cannot safely be trusted on any other foundation than religious principle, nor any government be secure which is not supported by moral habits. . . .Whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens. {6}

John Jay was one of the authors of the Federalist Papers and became America's first Supreme Court Justice. He also served as the president of the American Bible Society. He understood the relationship between government and Christian values. He said, "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers." {7}

William Penn writing the *Frame of Government* for his new colony said, "Government, like clocks, go from the motion men give them; and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men, than men upon governments. Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad." {8}

The founders believed that good character was vital to the health of the nation.

New Man

Historian C. Gregg Singer traces the line of influence from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century in his book, *A Theological Interpretation of American History*. He says,

Whether we look at the Puritans and their fellow colonists of the seventeenth century, or their descendants of the eighteenth century, or those who framed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, we see that their political programs were the rather clear reflection of a consciously held political philosophy, and that the various political philosophies which emerged among the American people were intimately related to the theological

developments which were taking place. . . . A Christian world and life view furnished the basis for this early political thought which guided the American people for nearly two centuries and whose crowning lay in the writing of the Constitution of 1787.[{9}](#)

Actually, the line of influence extends back even further. Historian Arnold Toynbee, for example, has written that the American Revolution was made possible by American Protestantism. Page Smith, writing in the *Religious Origins of the American Revolution*, cites the influence of the Protestant Reformation. He believes that

The Protestant Reformation produced a new kind of consciousness and a new kind of man. The English Colonies in America, in turn, produced a new unique strain of that consciousness. It thus follows that it is impossible to understand the intellectual and moral forces behind the American Revolution without understanding the role that Protestant Christianity played in shaping the ideals, principles and institutions of colonial America.[{10}](#)

Smith argues that the American Revolution “started, in a sense, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenburg.” It received “its theological and philosophical underpinnings from John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and much of its social theory from the Puritan Revolution of 1640-1660.”[{11}](#)

Most people before the Reformation belonged to classes and social groups which set the boundaries of their worlds and established their identities. The Reformation, according to Smith, changed these perceptions. Luther and Calvin, in a sense, created a re-formed individual in a re-formed world.

Key to this is the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer where each person is “responsible directly to God for his or

her own spiritual state... The individuals who formed the new congregations established their own churches, chose their own ministers, and managed their own affairs without reference to an ecclesiastical hierarchy.”[{12}](#)

These re-formed individuals began to change their world including their view of government and authority.

Declaration of Independence

Let’s look at the Christian influence on the Declaration of Independence. Historian Page Smith points out that Thomas Jefferson was not only influenced by secular philosophers, but was also influenced by the Protestant Reformation. He says,

Jefferson and other secular-minded Americans subscribed to certain propositions about law and authority that had their roots in the Protestant Reformation. It is a scholarly common-place to point out how much Jefferson (and his fellow delegates to the Continental Congress) were influenced by Locke. Without disputing this we would simply add that an older and deeper influence – John Calvin – was of more profound importance.[{13}](#)

Another important influence was William Blackstone. Jefferson drew heavily on the writings of this highly respected jurist. In fact, Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* were among Jefferson’s most favorite books.

In his section on the “Nature of Laws in General,” Blackstone wrote, “as man depends absolutely upon his Maker for everything, it is necessary that he should, in all points, conform to his Maker’s will. This will of his Maker is called the law of nature.”[{14}](#)

In addition to the law of nature, the other source of law is from divine revelation. “The doctrines thus delivered we call the revealed or divine law, and they are to be found only in

the Holy Scriptures.” According to Blackstone, all human laws depended either upon the law of nature or upon the law of revelation found in the Bible: “Upon these two foundations, the law of nature and the law of revelation, depend all human laws.”[{15}](#)

Samuel Adams argues in “The Rights of the Colonists” that they had certain rights. “Among the natural Rights of the Colonists are these: First, a Right to Life; second, to Liberty; third, to Property; . . . and in the case of intolerable oppression, civil or religious, to leave the society they belong to, and enter into another. When men enter into society, it is by voluntary consent.”[{16}](#) This concept of natural rights also found its way into the Declaration of Independence and provided the justification for the American Revolution.

The Declaration 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 governing authorities” which “are established by God” (Rom. 13:1). Yet when they suffered from a “long train of abuses and usurpations,” they believed that “it is the right of the people to alter or abolish [the existing government] and to institute a new government.”

Constitution

The Christian influence on the Declaration is clear. What about the Constitution?

James Madison was the chief architect of the Constitution as well as one of the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. It is important to note that as a youth, he studied under a Scottish Presbyterian, Donald Robertson. Madison gave the credit to Robertson for “all that I have been in life.”[{17}](#) Later he was trained in theology at Princeton under the Reverend John Witherspoon. Scholars believe that Witherspoon’s Calvinism (which emphasized the fallen nature of man) was an important

source for Madison's political ideas.[{18}](#)

The Constitution was a contract between the people and had its origins in American history a century earlier:

One of the obvious by-products [of the Reformation] was the notion of a contract entered into by two people or by the members of a community amongst themselves that needed no legal sanctions to make it binding. This concept of the Reformers made possible the formation of contractals or, as the Puritans called them, "covenanted" groups formed by individuals who signed a covenant or agreement to found a community. The most famous of these covenants was the Mayflower Compact. In it the Pilgrims formed a "civil body politic," and promised to obey the laws their own government might pass. In short, the individual Pilgrim invented on the spot a new community, one that would be ruled by laws of its making.[{19}](#)

Historian Page Smith believes, "The Federal Constitution was in this sense a monument to the reformed consciousness. This new sense of time as potentiality was a vital element in the new consciousness that was to make a revolution and, what was a good deal more difficult, form a new nation."[{20}](#)

Preaching and teaching within the churches provided the justification for the revolution and the establishment of a new nation. Alice Baldwin, writing in *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*, says,

The teachings of the New England ministers provide one line of unbroken descent. For two generations and more New Englanders had . . . been taught that these rights were sacred and came from God and that to preserve them they had a legal right of resistance and, if necessary a right to . . . alter and abolish governments and by common consent establish new ones.[{21}](#)

Christian ideas were important in the founding of this republic and the framing of our American governmental institutions. And I believe they are equally important in the maintenance of that republic.

Notes

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2. George Washington, Farewell Address (September 19, 1796). Address of George Washington, President of the United States, and Late Commander in Chief of the American Army. To the People of the United States, Preparatory to His Declination.
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8. William Penn, April 25, 1682, in the preface of his Frame of Government of Pennsylvania. A Collection of Charters and Other Public Acts Relating to the Province of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1740), 10-12.
9. C. Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1964), 284-5.
10. Page Smith, *Religious Origins of the American Revolution*

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11. Ibid, 2.

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16. Samuel Adams, "The Rights of the Colonists" (Boston, 1772), *The Annals of America*, Vol. II, 217.

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18. James H. Smylie, "Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought," *American Presbyterians*

19. *Smith, Religious Origins,*

20. *Ibid., 4*

21. Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1928), 169.

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