



Point of View

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

America's Founding

By Kerby Anderson



America's Founding

During this year of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration, it is essential that we understand the founding of this country and the framing of the Constitution. This booklet provides a summary of the book, *Did America Have a Christian Founding?*, written by Mark David Hall.

He came to the POV radio studio six years ago to talk about his book. More recently, he was invited to speak to the first National Religious Liberty Commission meeting. He also joined us again by phone to talk about his book.

Historical Framework

Early in the book, he answers two questions. First, why does it matter? Second, how should we think about the founding of this country? Understanding the founding of this country matters because the founders drew from history to apply moral and political principles to the creation of the republic. It matters today because Supreme Court justices use our founding history to properly interpret the Constitution. It also matters because civic leaders appeal to the views of the founders to support contemporary policies.

He then asks, what would a Christian founding look like? One possibility he mentions is to acknowledge that most of the founders identified themselves as Christian, which they clearly did. Except for about 2,000 Jews, nearly all colonists identified as Christian. Approximately 98 percent of them were Protestants, and the remaining 2 percent were Roman Catholics. But that isn't too helpful since they may have been bad Christians or influenced by non-Christian ideas.

Another possibility is that the founders were all sincere Christians. This would be a more interest-

ing finding, yet sincerity is difficult to judge. Even if a founder was a member or regular attender of a church, it does not mean he was a sincere Christian.

A third possibility is that the founders were orthodox Christians. In some cases, they were: Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, John Jay, Roger Sherman, and John Witherspoon. Of course, other founders were not orthodox Christians. Mark David Hall says there is no evidence the founders rejected orthodox Christianity and embraced deism.

Still another possibility is that the founders acted like Christians. However, some historians reject the idea that many of the founders were Christian because they did not join churches or take communion. Other historians argue they were not Christian because they fought an unjust war with England and did not abolish slavery.

A final possibility is that the founders were influenced by Christian ideas. He says this is the most reasonable way to approach the question but requires that we do the hard work by looking at the links between biblical ideas and the framework of our government.

The Myth of the Founders' Deism

Many authors have argued that America's founders were deists. They point to such men as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They leave the impression that most founders were deists, or at least the most important ones were deists.

Deism in the eighteenth century was an intellectual movement that emphasized the role of reason in discerning religious truth. Most deists rejected traditional Christian doctrine such as the incarnation, virgin birth, atonement, resurrection, and miracles. As one writer explained, they believed "God set the world in motion and then abstained from human affairs."

Benjamin Franklin acknowledged in his autobiography that he fell under the influence of deism as a young man. Yet in later years, Franklin may have moved toward more traditional religious views. For example, at the Constitutional Convention, he reflected that "the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men."

Thomas Paine published his famous defense of deism in *The Age of Reason*. Since he was born and raised in England and only lived 20 of his 72 years in America, one could question whether he should be considered an American founder. And the reaction from many of the founders to his book was uniformly negative.

Thomas Jefferson rejected orthodox Christianity, but he went to great lengths to keep his religious view from the public. One time he broke his rule of secrecy and wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” That quote nearly cost him the election of 1800.

John Adams was a lifelong Congregationalist who believed it was appropriate for the state to support and encourage Christianity. He respected the Bible’s teaching and wrote in one letter, “The Ten Commandments and Sermon on the Mount contain my Religion.” However, Adams did reject the idea of Christ’s divinity.

Mark David Hall discusses other possible candi-

dates for deism and provides the religious background of each of them to show the possible influence on them. He then produces a lengthy list of founders who were orthodox Christians to show the influence they had in the founding of this country and the framing of the Constitution.

Godless Constitution

Many secular writers assure us that the Constitution is a secular document. In fact, there is even a book with the title, *The Godless Constitution*.

Mark David Hall addresses this myth in many ways. He reminds us that America's first constitution, The Articles of Confederation, invokes the "great Governor of the universe." Many state constitutions of the era also contained references to God and Christianity. And it is worth mentioning that the Constitution claims it was framed "in the year of our Lord."

The Constitution also assumes many Christian practices. The fourth commandment admonished believers to remember the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8). States and localities prohibited work on Sunday. And the Constitutional Con-

vention met every day except for the Christian Sabbath.

There was an encouragement from some delegates to add an amendment to the Constitution acknowledging God. One writer, however, wrote a newspaper essay arguing that God is not “like a foolish old man, [who] will think himself slighted and dishonored if he is not complimented with a seat or a prologue in the Constitution.”

The Constitution prohibits a religious test for office, but that does not suggest a godless Constitution. On the contrary, the founders recognized the diversity of faiths even though America was populated mostly by Christians at the time. And some even suggested that voters may have preferred a competent and reasonable candidate of a different faith than an incompetent, unreasonable member of their own tradition.

Religion and Morality

The founders of this country believed that civic authorities should protect, promote, and encourage religion and morality.

The framers of the Constitution were skeptical of

established religion but also wanted to provide a space where religious ideas could promote morality and civic virtue. That two-fold concept can be found in the First Amendment. They did not want to establish a national church, even though some colonies had state churches.

Mark David Hall describes in some detail what a few states (that previously were colonies) did to promote morality. He then describes the many times the Continental Congress and later the Congress called for days of prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving. They passed numerous resolutions setting aside time for prayer.

Congress also endorsed the project to publish what was called the “Aitken Bible.” But the funding came from the Pennsylvania legislature since Congress was short of funds. And one of the first acts of Congress was to appoint congressional chaplains.

Presidents who took the oath of office did so by placing their hand on the Bible and ending the oath with the words “so help me God.” Some critics question whether George Washington said

those words, but virtually every state required them in their prescribed oaths. It would have been unremarkable for Washington to add those words to his oath of office.

And while we are talking about George Washington, we should remember his famous observation that of “all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” He and the other founders believed we should promote and encourage religion and morality.

Religious Liberty

We can see the value of having a proper view of the founding of America when looking at the subject of religious liberty. Many scholars assert that the concept of religious liberty came from the Enlightenment. Mark David Hall explains in a chapter how biblical and theological arguments played key roles in defining and supporting religious liberty.

The framers understood that when religious minorities gained political power, they often forgot about their commitment to religious liberty. They

even saw this phenomenon in the colonies that existed before the beginning of the republic.

George Mason's 1776 draft of the Virginia Declaration of Rights included a section protecting religious liberty. James Madison modified it to make clear that "the free exercise of religion" is a right, not a privilege granted by the states. Years later, he proposed what today we refer to as the First Amendment, which states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

For more than 150 years, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of religious liberty. But as we document in our booklet, *A Biblical View on Church and State*, Justice Hugo Black used a phrase from a letter by Thomas Jefferson to justify a separation of church and state. Over time, this decision was used to argue that nearly any religious activity (prayer, Bible reading, moment of silence) and any religious symbol (cross, creche, Ten Commandments, etc.) is impermissible outside of church and home.

In the last two decades, we have seen a return to the original meaning of the First Amendment.

Many of the Supreme Court justices have been willing to return to the original meaning of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Today we enjoy more religious freedom than we have had in past decades.

Mark David Hall argues that America did have a Christian founding. And the founders made it clear their citizens of faith are free to worship and act according to the dictates of their consciences.



Additional Resources

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical View on The Federalist Papers*, Point of View Ministries, 2021

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical View on Church and State*, Point of View Ministries, 2022.

Kerby Anderson, *A Biblical View on One Nation Under God*, Point of View Ministries, 2025.

Daniel Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Mark David Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding?* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019.

David 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.

Thomas Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, NY: Basic Books, 2010.



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