

# The Bible and the Constitution



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# **We the People**

## **The Biblical Precedent for Popular Sovereignty**

Modern accounts of the philosophical underpinnings of the American Revolution often attribute the concept of popular sovereignty to men such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau with Locke being the one most often praised as the source of the American ideal of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. To make this attribution, however, modern scholarship has had to ignore or, perhaps, forget the previously held view that the notion of popular sovereignty can be traced to the government of ancient Israel as recorded in the pages of the Bible. As a result, many students of American history are completely unaware of any link between the doctrines of Scripture and the foundational principles of American government. This book is an attempt to remedy this defect through a review of both the political theory of the Bible and the recognition of that theory by the philosophers of several ages leading up to the American Revolution.

### **I. Popular Sovereignty**

To develop a proper understanding of the political theory advocated in the Bible, it is

necessary to begin with the initial formation of the nation of Israel after their exodus from Egypt. The first account of this formation begins in the nineteenth chapter of the book of Exodus. It is in this chapter that we find God telling the Israelites:

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”<sup>1</sup>

This passage is the preamble to what is known as the Mosaic Covenant. The full covenant is recorded in chapters nineteen through twenty-four, and it contains the famous Ten Commandments as well as several other foundational laws of the nation of Israel. These five chapters of the book of Exodus can be viewed as being equivalent in nature to the Constitution of America. They form the foundation upon which all the other laws of the nation were established.

The concept of popular sovereignty is present throughout the entirety of the Mosaic Covenant,

and it is obvious even in the preamble itself. God did not simply tell the Israelites that they would be a holy nation unto Him. Instead, He presented them with an “if ... then” proposition and left it up to the people themselves to decide whether or not to become the kind of nation that He wanted them to be. The response of the people to this proposition is found in verse eight where we read that they gave unanimous consent to do everything that the Lord commanded them to do. From this, it is plainly obvious that government of the nation of Israel was established on the concept of popular sovereignty. The people were granted the sovereignty to either accept or reject God’s offer, and they willingly chose to accept it.

But the preamble is not the only recognition of popular sovereignty to be found in this covenant. When the covenant is examined in its entirety, it becomes evident that it is in the form of a suzerainty treaty. This has often been recognized by biblical scholars, and the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia records that:

"Form-critical and other studies have shown the striking parallels in structure between second-millennium-B.C. suzerainty treaties and the records of the covenant in Exodus and

## Deuteronomy."<sup>2</sup>

Suzerainty treaties were common in the region of Palestine during the time of the exodus, and they consisted of agreements between a greater king and a lesser king in which the lesser king would agree to serve the greater in all areas expressly stated in the treaty. This means that the Mosaic Covenant is a recognized treaty of submission between two sovereigns. The identity of the greater sovereign in this treaty is immediately recognized as God, and the lesser sovereign can only be the audience of the people who "answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do."<sup>3</sup>

This kind of treaty relationship was recognized by philosophers like Grotius, Pufendorf and Vattel to be one in which "the inferior Power remains a Sovereign State" and in which "the weaker Power may exercise the rights of sovereignty so long as by so doing no detriment is caused to the interests or influence of the Suzeraine Power."<sup>4</sup> Grotius, for example, described a suzerainty treaty when he spoke of a league between sovereigns "where by the express Articles of the League some lasting Preference is given from one to the other; that is, where one is obliged to maintain the Dominion and Honour of another." He explained that

people bound by this type of treaty are still free and then concluded that "If then a Nation bound by such a Covenant, remains yet free, and not subjected to the Power of another, it follows, that it yet retains its Sovereignty."<sup>5</sup>

Thus the fact that the Mosaic Covenant is in the form of a suzerainty treaty establishes two facts about the popular sovereignty of the Israelites. First, this form of treaty was a recognition by God of the sovereignty of the people at the time that the covenant was offered. Second, this treaty between a sovereign people and the sovereign Lord did not remove sovereignty from either. By accepting the terms of this treaty, the people of Israel agreed to submit to the terms of the covenant while still retaining their own sovereignty.

In addition to this, there is yet another evidence of popular sovereignty found in the record of the formation of the nation of Israel. That is the fact that the Mosaic Covenant was presented to the people for their ratification before it was put into effect.

In the twenty-fourth chapter of Exodus, we read:

“And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered



with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do.

And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel ... And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient.”<sup>6</sup>

Here, we see that after God delivered all of the terms of the covenant to Moses, Moses came and told all the people what the Lord had said, and all the people gave unanimous assent to the terms. Moses then committed the entire covenant to writing and read what he had written before all the people. Then the people voiced unanimous consent a second time to confirm that they were agreeing to the covenant exactly as it had been written.

There are, therefore, three different recognitions of popular sovereignty in the Mosaic Covenant. First, the sovereignty of the people is recognized in the “if...then” proposition of the preamble. Second, the sovereignty of the people is plainly implied by the suzerainty treaty form used by the covenant. And third, the concept of popular

sovereignty is established by the process of ratifying the covenant through a unanimous vote of the people. These facts demonstrate that the idea of popular sovereignty preceded the writings of John Locke by more than 3,000 years.

## **II. Popular Election**

One of the most important aspects of popular sovereignty that is found in the Bible is that of the popular election of leaders. There are several elections mentioned in the Scriptures, and the right of the people to choose their own leaders was a well established doctrine of Judaism. One of the first elections to be recorded is found in both the eighteenth chapter of Exodus and in the first chapter of Deuteronomy. In the first of these chapters, we read:

“And Moses' father in law said unto him ... thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it

be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee. If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace. So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father in law, and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.”<sup>7</sup>

There are two objections to the claim that this passage refers to popular elections. First, it is objected that this chapter only mentions Moses choosing leaders for the people and not the people choosing leaders for themselves. The second objection is that this plan of leadership was suggested by Jethro, Moses' father-in-law rather than commanded by God. We will address both of these objections in turn.

In light of the first objection, it should be noted that verse twenty-four (“So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father in law, and did all that he had said”) is a summation of an event that must have taken a great deal of time. This passage does not give us any details of how Moses carried out his father-in-laws advice. It only

records that he did so. To read the details of how these leaders were chosen, we have to turn to the parallel passage in the first chapter of Deuteronomy where Moses recounted this event to the people just before they entered Canaan. In that chapter, we read:

“And I spake unto you at that time, saying, I am not able to bear you myself alone: The LORD your God hath multiplied you, and, behold, ye are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude ... How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife? Take you wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you. And ye answered me, and said, The thing which thou hast spoken is good for us to do. So I took the chief of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens, and officers among your tribes.”<sup>8</sup>

When we compare the account in this passage with the account given in Exodus, it becomes clear that Moses carried out the advice of his

father-in-law by going before the people and asking them to choose or elect men that he could then appoint to be the leaders of the new nation. Thus the reflection of Deuteronomy makes it clear that the Israelites used popular elections to determine their leaders, but this still leaves the second objection that the use of elections was not commanded by God.

To answer the second objection, we need to consider yet another passage on this topic which is found in the eleventh chapter of Numbers. There we read:

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone ... And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the LORD, and gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle. And the

LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease.”<sup>9</sup>

In this passage, we discover that while God did not directly command the use of popular elections, yet He chose to place His sanction upon that method by giving the elders the same authority that He had formerly given to Moses. These men who were selected through the election of the people were given the right to stand with Moses before the immediate presence of God in the tabernacle and hear the voice of the Lord with their own ears. These elders were not mere ministers of Moses to aid him in managing the affairs of the people, they were declared to be his equals, and they shared with him the responsibility of proclaiming the words of the Lord to the people. There is no higher sanction that God could have given upon the use of popular elections.

However, there is another objection that is sometimes raised against, or rather, because of God's clear sanction of the popular election of the elders of Israel. It is occasionally interjected at this point that, while God did give the elders

the same spirit which He had placed upon Moses, yet Moses remained the supreme leader of the people because he was directly chosen by God rather than through the will of the people.

This objection, though often perceived of as being true, is actually contrary to the record of Scripture.

According to the Bible, God delivered the first part of the Mosaic Covenant directly to the assembly of the people of Israel in an audible voice. This part of the covenant has become known as the Ten Commandments, and we read about God delivering them to the people in the twentieth chapter of Exodus and the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy. In the account from Deuteronomy we read:

“The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire ... These words the LORD spake unto all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more. And he wrote them in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me. And it came to pass, when ye heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, (for the mountain did burn with fire,) that ye came near unto me, even all the heads of your

tribes, and your elders; And ye said, Behold, the LORD our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth. Now therefore why should we die? for this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go thou near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it. And the LORD heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the LORD said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken. O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!”<sup>10</sup>



In the above quotation, we discover a remarkable series of events. When God established the Mosaic Covenant in the form of a suzerainty treaty with the nation of Israel, He did not choose to speak to Moses alone. Rather, God descended upon the mountain in the sight of all the people, and began presenting the terms of the covenant directly to the body of the people. The people heard the ten commandments which formed the foundation of the covenant, and then they became afraid. When God stopped speaking in order to record the Ten Commandments in writing, the people took advantage of the pause to approach Moses and ask him to be their representative before the Lord. According to the parallel passage in Exodus, Moses actually pleaded with the people that they not succumb to their fears,<sup>11</sup> but they refused his pleas. Then, the Bible records for us that God heard the decision of the people to elect Moses to be their representative and that He not only approved of their decision but also that He wished for them to always display such wisdom. Here we have a record of the God of the Universe rejoicing because the nation of Israel decided on their own to elect a representative to stand before Him in their place.

God's approval of popular election in these two instances seems to have established a precedent

which was followed throughout the history of the nation of Israel. Joshua was the leader of the Israeli military under Moses,<sup>12</sup> and it was only reasonable that he be allowed to continue in that position during the conquest of Canaan. It is remarkable to note, however, that the elder's also retained their positions as the rulers of the nation, and they continued in that capacity after the death of Joshua.<sup>13</sup> Then, during the time of the Judges, there were two additional elections.

The first occurred after the defeat of the Midianites under the leadership of Gideon. When the people of Israel had successfully driven out their enemies, we read that, "the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian."<sup>14</sup> Gideon declined their request, but there was another Judge several years later who accepted an election by the elders of his city.

The second example of elections in the book of Judges is found in chapter eleven where we read:

"And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of

Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh.”<sup>15</sup>

These two passages reveal to us that, during the time of the Judges, the people of Israel continued to elect their leaders through the process of popular election. Both Gideon and Jephthah were elected by the people. The former was elected by the men of the entire nation and refused to accept the position. The latter was elected by the people of his city, and he accepted the position that they gave him. In both cases, however, we find the principle of popular election to be firmly established in the governing philosophy of Israel.

This principle remained in effect even during the period referred to as the monarchy of Israel. In

fact, the Scriptures clearly reveal that it was the principle of popular election which allowed for the establishment of a king in the first place. The first reference to a king in Israel is found in the seventeenth chapter of Deuteronomy where we read:

“When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother.”<sup>16</sup>

The intriguing aspect of this passage is that God left the decision over whether or not to have a king entirely in the hands of the people. They were to decide both when to have a king and who that king was to be, for we do not read “He will be king over thee whom the Lord chooses” but rather “Thou shalt ... set him king over thee whom the Lord ... chooses.” God was to have a voice in deciding who would be king, but He recognized the sovereignty of the people by granting them the authority to either accept or

reject the one whom He should choose. This power of the people to choose their own king is well documented in the elections of the first two kings of the monarchy.

In accordance with the instructions from Deuteronomy, the people of Israel eventually decided that they wanted to have a king. They approached the prophet Samuel and requested that he assist them by anointing someone to be their king. This request is recorded in the eighth chapter of I Samuel:

“Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other

gods, so do they also unto thee. Now therefore hearken unto their voice: howbeit yet protest solemnly unto them, and shew them the manner of the king that shall reign over them.”<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to note that this request was made by the elders who were still serving in their role as rulers of the people, but the most important aspect of this passage is the indication that the people were choosing to have a king at this time for the wrong reason. God told Samuel that this decision had been made because the people had rejected God and turned away from worshipping Him. Nevertheless, God still honored the right of the people to choose their own ruler and commanded Samuel to obey the request of the elders.

The ensuing coronation of King Saul was far from the simple, straightforward process that most people think that it was. The first part of the biblical record corresponds well with the standard Sunday-school account. The people asked for a king.<sup>18</sup> God told Samuel to anoint Saul.<sup>19</sup> Samuel showed the people that God had chosen Saul. The people rejoiced and shouted “God save the king.”<sup>20</sup> At this point, however, the biblical account differs greatly from the

conception that the average Christian has of this event. Immediately after the people shouted “God save the king,” the Bible tells us that:

“Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the LORD. And Samuel sent all the people away, every man to his house. And Saul also went home to Gibeah; and there went with him a band of men, whose hearts God had touched. But the children of Belial said, How shall this man save us? And they despised him, and brought him no presents. But he held his peace.”<sup>21</sup>

The primary difference between this account and the average perception of Saul’s coronation is that there is no mention of any coronation at this point in the record. Instead of reading of Saul being crowned king, we discover Samuel sending all the people home including Saul, and we learn that some of the people, those identified here as children of Belial, did not want Saul as their king. This is not what we would expect to read if Saul was simply a heavenly chosen monarch to be imposed upon the nation. If that were the case, we would expect to find Samuel crowning Saul and commanding all the people to follow him as the man chosen by God. Instead,

we discover that the people were not in agreement about Saul being king and that Samuel sent everyone home after instructing them in the proper nature of the kingdom.

If we were to search the book of I Samuel for the account of Saul's coronation, we would discover it all the way at the end of the next chapter where the Bible tells us that "all the people went to Gilgal; and there they made Saul king before the LORD."<sup>22</sup> Between this account of Saul's coronation and the account of Samuel sending everyone home without crowning Saul as king, an event is recorded which reveals to us the role that popular election played in Saul's ascension to the throne.

The tenth chapter of I Samuel closes with the statement that some of the people did not want Saul to be their king. The eleventh chapter opens with an account of the Ammonites declaring war against the Israeli city of Jabeshgilead. The elders of Jabeshgilead sent messengers throughout Israel in search of someone to deliver them from the army of the Ammonites. It is important to note that they did not send a messenger to Saul as we would expect them to do if he were their king. In fact, none of the messengers ever said anything to Saul. He was out tending the sheep when news of the



Ammonite invasion reached the town of Gibeah, and he only learned of it when he asked why the people of the town were so upset. After learning of the plight of Jabesh, Saul sent letters throughout the nation threatening to destroy the livestock of any man who refused to follow him into battle against the Ammonites. Three hundred and thirty thousand men joined Saul in defeating the Ammonites, and in verse twelve we read that, after this victory, “the people said unto Samuel, Who is he that said, Shall Saul reign over us? bring the men, that we may put them to death.”

Notice the change in the attitude of the people toward Saul. At the end of the tenth chapter, we find that there was dissension among the people regarding Saul’s lack of military experience. This is what was meant by the question “How shall this man save us?” In chapter eleven, we read of Saul having to invoke the authority of Samuel to get the people to follow him into battle. Once he was able to get the people to follow him, Saul led them in a decisive victory over the Ammonites. Then, after Saul had proven his military expertise to the people, they came to Samuel with the charge that anyone who doubted Saul’s ability to lead should be put to death. It was only at this point, when the people were firmly and perhaps even unanimously in

favor of Saul, that Samuel gathered them together at Gilgal and crowned Saul king of Israel. This series of events is inconsistent with the idea of an imposed monarchy, but it is in full agreement with the principle of popular sovereignty.

The coronation account of King David also gives testimony to the prevalence of popular sovereignty in the political ideology of ancient Israel. The transition from Saul to David was not an easy transition. Saul was killed in battle while David was in exile, and the biblical account tells us that, when David learned of the death of Saul, he returned to Hebron where he was met by the men of the tribe of Judah. The men of Judah decided to crown David as king not over all of Israel but rather over just the tribe of Judah.<sup>23</sup> The rest of the nation chose to crown Saul's son Ishbosheth as their king.<sup>24</sup> It is only after the account of the death of Ishbosheth that we read:

“Then came all the tribes of Israel to David unto Hebron, and spake, saying, Behold, we are thy bone and thy flesh.

Also in time past, when Saul was king over us, thou wast he that leddest out and broughtest in Israel: and the LORD said to thee, Thou shalt feed my people Israel, and thou shalt be a captain over

Israel. So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a league with them in Hebron before the LORD: and they anointed David king over Israel.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus we see that David’s coronation was just as much an act of popular sovereignty as that of Saul. He was not crowned king over all Israel until all the elders of the nation had agreed to be under his rule.

The idea that the people should be free to elect their own rulers is an integral component of the government established by God in the Old Testament, and it was such a natural part of Israel’s political ideology that it was adopted by the leaders of the early church as the proper way to fill positions in that body as well. In the sixth chapter of Acts, Luke records for us that the church was in need of leaders to oversee the daily business, but the Apostles did not simply choose the men that they wanted to have in those positions and force them upon the people. To do so would have been completely foreign to the political mindset of the Jews. Instead, they followed that method of choosing leaders which came natural to them under the Old Testament legal system. They asked the people to take a vote and choose their own leaders.

"Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them."<sup>26</sup>

This account of the election of the deacons follows the exact same pattern as the first election of the elders described in Deuteronomy. In that original election, Moses called the people together and asked them to choose men that he could then appoint to be rulers over them, and we find that same pattern in the words of the Apostles. They asked the people to choose men from among themselves that the Apostles could then appoint as the leaders of the daily business

of the church. The early church had the same casual familiarity with popular elections as is found among the various clubs, businesses and other organizations of America, and such a familiarity only makes sense in a culture with a long history of freely choosing their own leaders.

### **III. The Right of Resistance**

One of the concepts inherent in the doctrine of popular sovereignty is that of the right of the people to resist the usurpation of power by a tyrant, and this right is recognized in the Scriptures as well. In fact, the book of Judges is literally filled with accounts of God raising up men for the purpose of delivering the nation from tyranny.

First, there was Othniel who delivered the nation of Israel through a military revolt against Chushanrishathaim.<sup>27</sup> Then there is the account of Ehud who assassinated King Eglon and led the Israelites in a rebellion against their Moabite conquerors.<sup>28</sup> Ehud was followed by Shamgar who delivered Israel after killing six hundred Philistines with his ox goad.<sup>29</sup> After Shamgar, we learn of the efforts of Deborah, Barak and Jael in the revolt against Jabin.<sup>30</sup> Then the Israelites were subdued under the Midianites,

and God raised up Gideon to rebel against their tyranny.<sup>31</sup> Gideon was followed by Tola and then Jair of whom we know very little, and they were followed by Jephthah whom we have already mentioned.<sup>32</sup> Then came Ibzan, Elon and Abdon who are barely even mentioned before being followed by the mighty Samson and his lengthy feud with the Philistines.<sup>33</sup>

There are a total of twelve judges mentioned in this book. We know very little about five of them, but of the other seven, we know that they each led a revolt against a tyrannical government and that their actions against those governments were all sanctioned by God.

It may be argued, perhaps, that the judges fought against foreign rulers who had invaded Israel and therefore cannot be used to justify resistance against one's native government. There are two answers which can be given to this argument. First, it should be noted that several of the kings in the book of Judges had been established as the official rulers of Israel for many years before they were opposed. In the cases of both Ehud and Jephthah, Israel had been under foreign control for eighteen years, and in the case of Samson, Israel had been governed by the Philistines for forty years before God raised up a deliverer. Certainly a government which has

been established for forty years can no longer be dismissed as a mere foreign invader.

Nevertheless, even if we ignore the evidence in the book of Judges as being irrelevant, there still remains another example of resistance to tyranny which cannot be dismissed as resisting a foreign power. That example is found in the twelfth chapter of I Kings.

In this passage we read of the actions of Israel toward their new king, Rehoboam. After coming to Shechem for Rehoboam's coronation, the people requested that the king lower their tax burden from the heavy taxes of Solomon his father. Rehoboam's response was that of a tyrant. Instead of considering the needs of the people, he focused on his own desires and replied, "My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."<sup>34</sup> When the people heard this response, they denounced Rehoboam's right to rule over them and said, "What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: to your tents, O Israel: now see to thine own house, David."<sup>35</sup> This, of course, angered Rehoboam, and he gathered an army with the intent of forcing the rebellious tribes to submit to his rule. But God sent a prophet to tell Rehoboam, "Ye shall not go up, nor fight against

your brethren the children of Israel: return every man to his house; for this thing is from me.”<sup>36</sup>

Rehoboam wisely heeded God’s command and allowed the ten northern tribes to reject his authority and establish their own kingdom. Many opinions have been advanced concerning the justification of the actions of the northern tribes, but the important thing to note is that they did not consider the established monarchy to be permanently binding upon the nation.

The denial of the permanency of the monarchy is evident from the question “What portion have we in David?” and the answer, “neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse.” The reasoning behind this question and its answer was that the descendents of David could not trace their claim of authority over Israel back to any sort of paternal right of authority. Political theorists have frequently recognized that most kingdoms were originally established under a patriarchal form of government. A father would move his family and servants into some new territory and establish himself as a ruler over them. He would then pass this authority on to his firstborn son who would do the same for his son. This continual passage of authority from father to son over successive generations is the foundation of the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Sir Robert Filmer famously advocated for this right



in his book *Patriarcha* in which he said of the nation of Israel that “when God gave the *Israelites* Kings, he reestablished the Antient and Prime Right of Lineal Succession to Paternal Government.”<sup>37</sup> In spite of Filmer’s claim, it was precisely on the absence of this concept of paternal government that the northern tribes justified their rejection of Rehoboam’s authority. None of the northern tribes were descended from Jesse. Therefore, David, the son of Jesse, never had any claim to parental authority over them. From which it obviously follows that Rehoboam, the descendant of David, had no claim to parental authority either. David was elected into office by the free vote of the people, and his grandson could be removed from office by the same manner.

In addition to this justification of the right of resistance, there remains the statement from God that the secession of the northern tribes was from Him. When God first laid down the principles for the Israelites to follow when choosing a king, He also established several rules that were to govern the king’s behavior under the law. Those rules can be found in the seventeenth chapter of Deuteronomy where we read:

“But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return

to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way.

Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold. And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites:

And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.”<sup>38</sup>

Solomon violated nearly all of these rules, and God sent the prophet Ahijah to pronounce judgment against Solomon for those violations. This judgment is recorded in the chapter immediately preceding the account of the rebellion under Rehoboam.

“Wherefore the LORD said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son. Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen.”<sup>39</sup>

From these passages, we can conclude that the kings of Israel were expected to be just as subject to the law as the people. No king of that nation was above the law, and the just punishment of those who acted as if they were above the law was the removal of their authority by the decision of the people.

#### **IV. Recognition Among the Philosophers**

As noted at the beginning of this article, most modern scholars only trace the American ideology of popular sovereignty to the writings of John Locke. A small fact that is very seldom mentioned is that Locke's *Two Treatises on*

*Government* was written as a refutation of the aforementioned book *Patriarcha* by Sir Robert Filmer. Filmer, however, wrote his book to defend the concept of the divine right of kings in opposition to the doctrine of popular sovereignty. If Locke was writing in response to Filmer, and Filmer was writing in response to previous concepts of popular sovereignty, then it must follow that Locke was only defending an idea which predated him; and according to Filmer, the concept of popular sovereignty had been prevalent among Christians for many centuries prior to his time. He wrote:

“Since the time that School-Divinity began to flourish, there hath been a common Opinion maintained, as well by Divines, as by divers other learned Men, which affirms,

Mankind is naturally endowed and born with Freedom from all Subjection, and at liberty to chose what Form of Government it please: And that the Power which any one Man hath over others, was at first bestowed according to the discretion of the Multitude.

This Tenent was first hatched in the Schools, and hath been fostered by all succeeding Papists for good Divinity.

The Divines also of the Reformed Churches have entertained it, and the Common People every where tenderly embrace it, as being most plausible to Flesh and blood, for that it prodigally distributes a Portion of Liberty to the meanest of the Multitude, who magnifie Liberty, as if the height of Humane Felicity were only to be found in it, never remembering That the desire of Liberty was the first Cause of the Fall of Adam ... Yet upon the ground of this Doctrine both Jesuites, and some other zealous favourers of the Geneva Discipline, have built a perillous Conclusion, which is, That the People or Multitude have Power to punish, or deprive the Prince, if he transgress the Laws of the Kingdom.”<sup>40</sup>

Here in Filmer’s book, we find that all three of the principles presented in this article – popular sovereignty, popular election and the right of resistance – have been taught and accepted by Christians since long before the Protestant Reformation. Now, it should be noted that Filmer did claim that these principles were “not to be found in the Ancient Fathers and Doctors of the Primitive Church.” He was mistaken in this claim, but he was not so bold as to completely

deny that these principles had a longstanding relationship with the Christian community.

The earliest Christians often found themselves under governments that were hostile to the teachings of the Scriptures, and consequently, they focused on the resistance aspect of popular sovereignty. One of the earliest references to popular sovereignty among Christian writers can be found in the book *Against Heresies* in which Irenaeus wrote that “God has always preserved freedom, and the power of self-government in man.”<sup>41</sup> Later, in the same book, he hinted at the right of the people to resist a tyrant when he wrote:

“And for this reason too, magistrates themselves, having laws as a clothing of righteousness whenever they act in a just and legitimate manner, shall not be called in question for their conduct, nor be liable to punishment. But whatsoever they do to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and illegally, and tyrannically, in these things shall they also perish; for the just judgment of God comes equally upon all, and in no case is defective.”<sup>42</sup>

Tertullian also referenced the right of resistance

in his defense of Christian violations of Roman law. He wrote:

“Well, if I have found what your law prohibits to be good, as one who has arrived at such a previous opinion, has it not lost its power to debar me from it, though that very thing, if it were evil, it would justly forbid to me? If your law has gone wrong, it is of human origin ... nor does a citizen render a true subjection to the law, if he does not know the nature of the thing on which the punishment is inflicted. It is not enough that a law is just, nor that the judge should be convinced of its justice; those from whom obedience is expected should have that conviction too. Nay, a law lies under strong suspicions which does not care to have itself tried and approved: it is a positively wicked law, if, unproved, it tyrannizes over men.”<sup>43</sup>

Tertullian expressed this same thought in a later work in which he said that “the king indeed must be honoured, yet so that the king be honoured *only* when he keeps to his own sphere.”<sup>44</sup> Origen carried this right of resistance to its ultimate conclusion in his work *Contra Celsum* where

we read:

“If a man were placed among Scythians, whose laws were unholy, and having no opportunity of escape, were compelled to live among them, such an one would with good reason, for the sake of the law of truth, which the Scythians would regard as wickedness, enter into associations contrary to their laws, with those like-minded with himself; so, if truth is to decide, the laws of the heathens which relate to images, and an atheistical polytheism, are ‘Scythian’ laws, or more impious even than these, if there be any such. It is not irrational, then, to form associations in opposition to existing laws, if done for the sake of the truth. For as those persons would do well who should enter into a secret association in order to put to death a tyrant who had seized upon the liberties of a state, so Christians also, when tyrannized over by him who is called the devil, and by falsehood, form leagues contrary to the laws of the devil, against his power, and for the safety of those others whom they may succeed in persuading to revolt from a government which is, as it were,



‘Scythian,’ and despotic.’”<sup>45</sup>

Origen was responding to the accusation that Christians violated the law whenever they would meet in secret rather than in public assemblies. In defending the practice of the Christians, he claimed that the secret meetings of Christians in violation of the law were just as praiseworthy as the secret meetings of those who plot to kill a tyrannical king. In making this comparison, Origen reveals to us that the early Christians recognized a crucial component of popular sovereignty in that they recognized the right of the people to depose a ruler whom they found to be a tyrant.

Augustine lived two centuries after Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen during a time when Christianity enjoyed much toleration and even acceptance throughout the Roman Empire. As a result, he gave less consideration to the right of resisting government and more to the proper nature of government. Instead of focusing on right of the Christian to violate the law, he reasoned of the justice or injustice of the laws themselves and came to the conclusion that: “A law which is not just does not seem to me to be a law.”<sup>46</sup> And in his book *The City of God*, Augustine endeavored to improve Cicero’s definition of a republic by writing first that “if

we are to accept the definitions laid down by Scipio in Cicero's *De Republica*, there never was a Roman republic.” This statement was later followed by Augustine’s conclusion that:

“if we discard this definition of a people, and, assuming another, say that a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love, then, in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love. Yet whatever it loves, if only it is an assemblage of reasonable beings and not of beasts, and is bound together by an agreement as to the objects of love, it is reasonably called a people; and it will be a superior people in proportion as it is bound together by higher interests, inferior in proportion as it is bound together by lower.”

This view of a state being “an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement” is a recognition of the default popular sovereignty of any people in the same sense in which God recognized the popular sovereignty of the people of Israel. During the seventeenth century, this view came to be known as the social contract theory of government.

Moving forward in history from Augustine, we come to Aquinas in the thirteenth century who included much material about the biblical doctrines of popular sovereignty in his book *Summa Theologica*. In regards to popular sovereignty itself, Aquinas addressed the power of the people to choose their own laws when he wrote:

“A law, properly speaking, regards first and foremost the order to the common good. Now to order anything to the common good, belongs either to the whole people, or to someone who is the viceregent of the whole people. And therefore the making of a law belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people: since in all other matters the directing of anything to the end concerns him to whom the end belongs.”<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting to note that Aquinas was here expounding on the writings of another Christian philosopher by the name of Isidore who wrote in the sixth century that "a law is an ordinance of the people, whereby something is sanctioned by the Elders together with the Commonalty."<sup>48</sup>

There is a remarkable correlation between Aquinas' statement regarding the law and the biblical record of God giving His Law first to the people as a whole and then, at their request, to Moses as their representative.

Aquinas also presented an analysis of the various kinds of government after which he came to this conclusion:

“Accordingly, the best form of government is in a state or kingdom, where one is given the power to preside over all; while under him are others having governing powers: and yet a government of this kind is shared by all, both because all are eligible to govern, and because the rulers are chosen by all. For this is the best form of polity, being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly aristocracy, in so far as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e. government by the people, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers. Such was the form of government established by the Divine Law. For Moses and his successors governed the people in such a way that each of them

was ruler over all; so that there was a kind of kingdom. Moreover, seventy-two men were chosen, who were elders in virtue: for it is written (Deut. i. 15): I took out of your tribes men wise and honorable, and appointed them rulers: so that there was an element of aristocracy. But it was a democratical government in so far as the rulers were chosen from all the people; for it is written (Exod. xviii. 21): Provide out of all the people wise (Vulg., – able) men, etc.; and, again, in so far as they were chosen by the people; wherefore it is written (Deut. i. 13): Let me have from among you wise (Vulg., – able) men, etc. Consequently it is evident that the ordering of the rulers was well provided for by the Law.”<sup>49</sup>

Here Aquinas cites the biblical record directly in order to state that a government founded on the principle of popular election is the best form of government. He went on to explain that there were laws given to govern the conduct of the king and that certain violations of those laws cause kings to become tyrants:

“As regards the appointment of a king,  
He did establish the manner of election

from the very beginning (Dt. 17:14, seqq.): and then He determined two points: first, that in choosing a king they should wait for the Lord's decision; and that they should not make a man of another nation king, because such kings are wont to take little interest in the people they are set over, and consequently to have no care for their welfare: secondly, He prescribed how the king after his appointment should behave, in regard to himself; namely, that he should not accumulate chariots and horses, nor wives, nor immense wealth: because through craving for such things princes become tyrants and forsake justice. He also appointed the manner in which they were to conduct themselves towards God: namely, that they should continually read and ponder on God's Law, and should ever fear and obey God. Moreover, He decided how they should behave towards their subjects: namely, that they should not proudly despise them, or ill-treat them, and that they should not depart from the paths of justice.”<sup>50</sup>

This recognition of the fact that kings can become tyrants generated several occasions for

discussions of the right to resist tyrants. One of those discussions included this statement:

“A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the ruler, as the Philosopher states (Polit. iii, 5; Ethic. viii, 10).

Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind, unless indeed the tyrant's rule be disturbed so inordinately, that his subjects suffer greater harm from the consequent disturbance than from the tyrant's government. Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely; for this is tyranny, being conducive to the private good of the ruler, and to the injury of the multitude.”<sup>51</sup>

In another place, Aquinas explained that this right to resist a tyrannical government extended to the use of force in cases of self-defense against an unjust sentence of death. He wrote that:

“A man may be condemned to death in

two ways. First justly, and then it is not lawful for the condemned to defend himself, because it is lawful for the judge to combat his resistance by force, so that on his part the fight is unjust, and consequently without any doubt he sins. Secondly a man is condemned unjustly: and such a sentence is like the violence of robbers, according to Ezech. 22:27, "Her princes in the midst of her are like wolves ravening the prey to shed blood." Wherefore even as it is lawful to resist robbers, so is it lawful, in a like case, to resist wicked princes; except perhaps in order to avoid scandal, whence some grave disturbance might be feared to arise."<sup>52</sup>

The right to resist robbers is not explained in this paragraph, but it is based on the teaching of Scripture that "if a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him."<sup>53</sup>

Thus we see that Aquinas continued the Christian recognition of the biblical precepts of popular sovereignty. He noted the right of the people to make their own laws. He found a government of elected rulers to be the best form of government, and he recognized the right of the people to resist



tyranny. All three of these points can be found repeated throughout the *Summa Theologica*.

We began this section with a statement from Sir Robert Filmer's book *Patriarcha*, and having established that Christians have taught the biblical doctrine of popular sovereignty throughout their history, let us return to Filmer and consider the men that he wrote against. One of those men was Robert Persons whose book *A Conference About the Next Succession to the Crowne of England* was written specifically to defend the right of the people to choose their own rulers. In that book, Persons presented a plethora of arguments from Scripture to support his view of popular sovereignty one of which was as follows:

"I have heard alleged sometimes by diverse those words of S. Peter ... Be you subject of every human creature, for God's cause, whether it be to a king, as the most excellent, or to Dukes sent by God for the punishment of evil men and praise of the good. Out of which words some do note two points, first that as on the one side the Apostle doth plainly teach that the magistrates authority is from God, by his first institution, in that he sayeth, we must be subject to them for God's cause, so on the other side, he

calleth it a human creature or a thing created by man, for that by man's free choice this particular form of government (as all other also) is appointed in every commonwealth, as before hath been declared: and that by mans election and consent, the same is laid upon some particular man or woman, according to the laws of every country, all which maketh it rightly to be called both a human creature, and yet from God."<sup>54</sup>

Persons later presented five examples from Scripture of the right of the people to resist tyranny with force. The first of those examples was:

"And for particular precedents of punishing of evil princes, in like manner by force and violence, when other means will not serve, these men say that besides all the great multitudes of examples alleged before by the Civil lawyer, in his fourth chapter, about evil kings deposed, there is great variety of several manners how the same hath been done, by God's own ordinance, recounted in holy writ, as first when the scripture sayeth in the books of Judges

that Ehud was stirred up by God to kill Eglon king of the Moabites that persecuted the people of Israel, and the manner was to feign a secret Embassade or message unto him, and so to slay him in his chamber, as he did, and God delivered his people by that means, and chose this particular way, whereas none will deny but that he might have done it by many other means less odious to the world than this was, that seemed so cruel and full of treason."<sup>55</sup>

These were the types of arguments that Filmer wrote against in his book *Patriarcha*, and these were the kinds of arguments that Locke defended in his *Two Treatises on Government*. Filmer attributed similar arguments to George Buchanan, Cardinal Bellarmine and John Calvin thereby indicating for us that the principles of popular sovereignty were known to have had a longstanding presence in Christian political thought.

In addition to Filmer, there is also another hostile witness to the prevalence of this doctrine among Christians. That witness is found in the writings of John Nalson. Nalson's book *The Common Interest of King and People* was

written in defense of the concept of monarchy. The first part of that book defended the authority of the British monarchy against the claims of the Pope, but the second part was a defense of monarchy against Presbyterianism which was Nalson's term for the idea that the people had a right to choose their own rulers. The eighth chapter of this book begins with a scathing description of the sects of Christians which advocated this view of government:

"Let us now come to take a view of the Younger Antagonists of Monarchy, The Popular Supremace of Presbytery, that Lerna Malorum, that revived Hydra of the Lake of Geneva, with its many headed Progeny, Anabaptists, Quakers, Levellers, &c. all which Unnatural offspring of this Monster are as kind to their Dam as Vipers, and as inconsistent with Monarchy as they pretend to be with the Papacy."<sup>56</sup>

Nalson then proceeded to ridicule the political doctrines of these sects, and in so doing, he revealed to us that these particular Christians had a history of defending popular sovereignty. Consider this paragraph as an example:

“And that this was the natural and easie

consequence, or to speak in their Cant  
the Use of Exhortation and  
Encouragement is plain: for it is lawful  
for all men to seek after Liberty,  
especially of Conscience; The People  
of these Nations are a freeborn People:  
It is the greatest felicity, and they the  
most happy People who may enjoy this  
Dear Liberty; all men are bound to  
promote their own Happiness, they  
cannot do too much to preserve it, and  
if they do indeavour most stoutly and  
constantly to maintain it, by War and  
Rebellion, they do no more than their  
duty does command them. The King  
was a Tyrant, and under the notion of  
Prerogative, did daily intrench upon the  
Peoples Priviledge and Liberty, he had  
a design to enslave them; The Commons  
were oppressed both in their Civil and  
Religious Rights; The Parliament were  
the Peoples Representatives, and from  
them had a power to defend their  
Liberties, and that stoutly with Sword  
and Pistol, Powder and Bullet, and to  
call the King to an account and to judge  
him for these miscarriages as from  
Calvins own words I shall presently  
show. The King had rendred himself  
unworthy to reign, as from his words

and Knoxes another of their fiery Doctors I shall shew; Therefore they might in defence and for the preservation of their Dear Liberties, especially Liberty of Conscience and Moderation, and the Rights of the People, make War against him ... they might by the encouragement and prevalency of their prosperous villanies alter the establishd form of Government, Civil and Ecclesiastical, depose the King, take away his Crown and Life, banish his Successor, and the whole Royal Family.”<sup>57</sup>

This paragraph is almost immediately followed by another in which we find:

“A second Principle of Presbytery is, that Kings have no divine Right to their Crowns, but that the Peoples Election is the only true Title to them, or which is as bad, that only the Laws and Constitutions of the Nation give them their Right.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus we find that Filmer and Nalson, two very prominent opponents to popular sovereignty, both recognized that this ideology had been proclaimed by Christians for several centuries

prior to the writings of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

We have seen that the Bible clearly teaches the sovereignty of the people, and that this doctrine has been noted by Christians throughout the entire history of the church. This discovery naturally leads us to question whether the founders of America also understood that the right of “we the people” to form our own government is firmly established in the Scriptures, and the answer to that question is a resounding, Yes!

There are many examples of this that we could look at, but one of my favorites comes from a short discourse between Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Cooper. Cooper was a Congregational minister who served as pastor of Battle Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts, and on May 15, 1781, Franklin penned a letter to Cooper with this somewhat cryptic paragraph:

“Your excellent Sermon gave me abundance of Pleasure, and is much admired by several of my Friends who understand English. I purpose to get it translated & printed at Geneva at the End of a Translation of your new Constitution. Nothing could be happier than your Choice of a Text, & your

Application of it. It was not necessary in New England where every body reads the Bible, and is acquainted with Scripture Phrases, that you should note the Texts from which you took them; but I have observed in England as well as in France, that Verses and Expressions taken from the sacred Writings, and not known to be such, appear very strange and awkward to some Readers; and I shall therefore in my Edition take the Liberty of marking the quoted Texts in the Margin.”<sup>59</sup>

The sermon that Franklin references here was a sermon preached by Samuel Cooper to which he gave the very lengthy and descriptive title of:

“A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency John Hancock, Esq; Governor, The Honourable Senate, and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, October 25th, 1780. Being the day of the Commencement of the Constitution and Inauguration of the New Government.”<sup>60</sup>

This was one of the most widely read sermons in America, and it presented a theme that was



commonly acknowledged in our nation at that time. Cooper preached that:

“The form of government originally established in the Hebrew nation by a charter from heaven, was that of a free republic, over which God himself, in peculiar favour to that people, was pleased to preside. It consisted of three parts; a chief magistrate who was called judge or leader, such as Joshua and others, a council of seventy chosen men, and the general assemblies of the people. Of these the two last were the most essential and permanent, and the first more occasional, according to the particular circumstances of the nation. Their council or Sanhedrim, remained with but little suspension, through all the vicissitudes they experienced, till after the commencement of the christian æra. And as to the assemblies of the people, that they were frequently held by divine appointment, and considered as the fountain of civil power, which they exerted by their own decrees, or distributed into various channels as they judged most conducive to their own security, order, and happiness, is evident beyond contradiction from the

sacred history. Even the law of Moses, though framed by God himself, was not imposed upon that people against their will; it was laid open before the whole congregation of Israel; they freely adopted it, and it became their law, not only by divine appointment, but by their own voluntary and express consent. Upon this account it is called in the sacred writings a covenant, compact, or mutual stipulation...

“To mention all the passages in sacred writ which prove that the Hebrew government, tho’ a theocracy, was yet as to the outward part of it, a free republic, and that the sovereignty resided in the people, would be to recite a large part of its history...

“Such a constitution, twice established by the hand of heaven in that nation, so far as it respects civil and religious liberty in general, ought to be regarded as a solemn recognition from the Supreme Ruler himself of the rights of human nature. Abstracted from those appendages and formalities which were peculiar to the Jews, and designed to answer some particular purposes of divine Providence, it points out in

general what kind of government infinite wisdom and goodness would establish among mankind.”

Franklin heartily agreed with Cooper’s claim that God had established a republican form of government in ancient Israel, and that the Americans should model their government after the government of the Old Testament. In fact, Franklin was so convinced of the supremacy of government patterned after the doctrines of the Bible that he sought to have Cooper’s sermon published throughout Europe as well as in America.

# One Nation Under God

## 49 Correlations Between the Bible and the Constitution

The conclusion to my book *Hidden Facts of the Founding Era* contains a list of 49 correlations between the Bible and the Constitution. The book is a refutation of Chris Pinto's popular video *The Hidden Faith of the Founding Fathers*, and it is written for a homeschool audience. You can read the conclusion here, and of course, the book is available on Amazon.

Mr. Pinto began his film with an account of Charles Thomson destroying his manuscript of the history of the Revolution, and with suspenseful music and shallow vocals, Mr. Pinto then proceeded to inform us that we have been deceived about the facts of the founding era. I agree with Mr. Pinto. We have been deceived, but the deception referred to by Mr. Pinto is not the same as that referred to by Mr. Thomson.

Mr. Pinto would have us believe that the historians deceived us when they wrote of the great faith of our founding fathers, but Mr. Thomson had another kind of deception in mind. The deception that Mr. Thomson spoke of is clearly stated in the quote from Dr. Rush that we looked at earlier. Dr. Rush's statement was:

"Charles Thompson: A man of great learning and general knowledge, at all times a genuine republican, and in the evening of his life a sincere Christian. He was the intimate friend of John Dickinson. He was once told in my presence, that he ought to write a history of the revolution. 'No (said he) I ought not, for I should contradict all the histories of the great events of the revolution, and shew by my account of men, motives and measures, that we are wholly indebted to the agency of Providence for its successful issue. Let the world admire the supposed wisdom and valor of our great men. Perhaps they may adopt the qualities that have been ascribed to them and thus good may be done. I shall not undeceive future generations.'"<sup>61</sup>

As we can see, the histories that Mr. Thompson viewed as being deceptive were the histories which attributed the success of the American Revolution to the wisdom and valor of men. He said that if he were to publish a true account of the Revolution, his book would contradict those historians who focused on the founders themselves and failed to give credit to God. In other words, Mr. Thomson claimed that his view of the revolution would stand in direct contradiction to the view expressed in Mr.

Pinto's film which contains multiple claims that the founding fathers were anti-Christians who relied on their own human reasoning and abilities rather than on God.

Now that we have access to the diaries and letters of many of the founding fathers, we can see for ourselves that Mr. Thomson was correct. We do not owe our great nation to the wisdom of our founding fathers themselves, but rather to the wisdom of their God. This reliance on God was admitted by the founders on multiple occasions. For example, prior to the Revolution, Samuel Adams wrote:

“The Rights of the Colonists as Christians: These may be best understood by reading and carefully studying the institutes of the great Law Giver and Head of the Christian Church, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament.”<sup>62</sup>

During the war, Mr. Washington made the following statement in a letter to Thomas Nelson:

“The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations, but, it will be time

enough for me to turn preacher, when my present appointment ceases”<sup>63</sup>

And in a letter to John Armstrong in 1792, Mr. Washington wrote:

“I am sure there never was a people, who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs, than those of the United States; and I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that agency, which was so often manifested during our Revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them.”<sup>64</sup>

Shortly after the ratification of the Constitution, Dr. Rush wrote:

“It would be ungrateful not to observe, that there have been less equivocal signs in the course of the formation and establishment of this government, of Heaven having favoured the federal side of the question. The union of twelve states in the form and ten states in the adoption of the Constitution, in less than ten months, under the influence of local prejudices, opposite interests, popular arts, and even the threats of bold and desperate men, is a solitary event in the history of mankind. I do not believe that the Constitution was the offspring of inspiration, but

I am as perfectly satisfied, that the union of the states, in its form and adoption, is as much the work of a divine Providence, as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testament, were the effects of a divine power.”<sup>65</sup>

Another founding father, John Dickinson, wrote:

“Kings or parliaments could not give the rights essential to happiness, as you confess those invaded by the Stamp Act to be. We claim them from a higher source – from the King of kings, and Lord of all the earth. They are not annexed to us by parchments and seals. They are created in us by the decrees of Providence, which establish the laws of our nature.”<sup>66</sup>

Alexander Hamilton defended the Constitution by claiming that:

“Whether the New Constitution, if adopted, will prove adequate to such desirable ends, time, the mother of events, will show. For my own part, I sincerely esteem it a system, which, without the finger of God, never could have been suggested and agreed upon by such a diversity of interests.”<sup>67</sup>

John Jay, our first Supreme Court Justice, wrote:



“I cannot forbear to embrace the opportunity afforded by the present occasion, to express my earnest hope that the peace, happiness, and prosperity enjoyed by our beloved country, may induce those who direct her national councils to recommend a general and public return of praise and thanksgiving to Him from whose goodness these blessings descend. The most effectual means of securing the continuance of our civil and religious liberties is, always to remember with reverence and gratitude the source from which they flow.”<sup>68</sup>

Many additional quotations could be provided in support of these that are mentioned here. Our founding fathers all recognized that the success of our nation in both government and war was the result of our dependence on the wisdom and the protection of the God of the Bible.

It was this reliance on the wisdom of God which enabled the founding fathers to establish a biblical form of government. Many modern historians are fond of claiming that our Constitution is a Godless document, but I have never seen them follow that claim with an analysis of the entire Constitution in which they demonstrate how each section came into existence without the help of God and the Bible. Those who take the time to compare the

Constitution with the teachings of the Bible, discover that the two are in perfect agreement. Our Constitution is exactly the kind of governing document that we would expect to be written by men who were students of the government established by God. There is not a single major component of the Constitution which is without precedent in the doctrines of Scripture.

The following list is just a brief overview of several points in which the principles of the Constitution agree with the doctrines of the Bible:

1. Article 1, Section 2 – “No person shall be a representative who shall not have attained to the age of twenty five years.” The age limits which the constitution places upon those wishing to obtain government positions is founded upon the wisdom expressed in Ecclesiastes 10:16 and Isaiah 3:4 in which great woe is pronounced against a nation that is ruled by children.

2. Article 1, Section 2 – “No person shall be a representative who shall not have... been seven years a citizen of the United States.” Under this law all members of the House of Representatives must be American citizens. This concept of limiting government positions solely to the citizens of a country is based on the example of the nation of Israel. In Exodus 18:21 as well as in Deuteronomy 1:13-15, it is stated that the

elders of Israel were elected from among the people.

3. Article 1, Section 2 – “The number of representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand.” The Great Compromise which led to the bicameral legislature of America is foreshadowed by Israel’s own bicameral system. In their system, the elders of Israel stood in the place of the House of Representatives and were likewise apportioned according to the populations of the tribes. Deuteronomy 1:15 reveals that the appointment of the elders of Israel was based upon an enumeration of the members of each tribe.

4. Article 1, Section 2 – “The House of Representatives... shall have the sole power of impeachment.” The power of impeachment has been recognized in Israel since the removal of their first king from office as recorded in I Samuel 13:13-14, and that power was implemented on several occasions recorded in the Old Testament in accordance with the statement in Proverbs 16:12 that “it is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness.” The concept of impeachment is also illustrated in the New Testament in that the church had the authority to remove a pastor from office as explained in Galatians 1:9 and I Timothy 5:19-20.

5. Article 1, Section 3 – “The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two senators from each state.” The second house of our bicameral legislature is also based on the example of Israel. Numbers 1:1-16 presents a list of the princes of Israel which were chosen to stand with Moses as representatives of the people. In contrast to the elders of Israel, each tribe had equal representation among the princes.

6. Article 1, Section 3 – “Two senators from each state, chosen by the legislature thereof.” Though this stipulation was later amended to allow a public election of the senators, the original wording of the Constitution finds its source in God’s direct appointment of the princes of Israel in contrast to the election of the elders as explained in Numbers 1:1-16.

7. Article 1, Section 3 – “No person shall be a senator who shall not have attained to the age of thirty years.” The implementation of an age limit upon senators also has its origin in the pronouncements of Ecclesiastes 10:16 and Isaiah 3:4.

8. Article 1, Section 3 – “No person shall be a senator who shall not have... been nine years a citizen of the United States.” Membership in the Senate is also limited solely to citizens of the

United States. In Numbers 1:4, God explained to Moses that the princes of Israel were to be citizens of Israel.

9. Article 1, Section 5 – “Each house shall be the judge of the elections, returns and qualifications of its own members.” Under this section, the members of each house of Congress are declared immune from the criticism of the other house. This same principle is found in the Scriptures in Paul’s question to the Romans. In Romans 14:4 he asks, “Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?” and answers, “to his own master he standeth or falleth.”

10. Article 1, Section 5 – “Each house shall keep a journal of its proceedings.” This requirement that congress record all legal proceedings is established on the biblical example of the recorders of ancient Israel. These recorders are mentioned in five Old Testament passages, I Samuel 8:16, I Samuel 20:24, I Kings 4:3, II Kings 18:18 and II Chronicles 34:8.

11. Article 1, Section 6 – “The senators and representatives shall receive a compensation for their services.” The requirement that government officials be paid for their service to their country is directly founded upon the teachings of Scripture. The command, “Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn,” given in

Deuteronomy 25:4 is explained in I Corinthians 9:9-14 and I Timothy 5:18 as a command that those who provide a service should receive due compensation for that service.

12. Article 1, Section 6 – “They shall... be privileged from arrest during their attendance at the session of their respective houses.” The legal immunity provided to the members of congress is based on the teaching of Christ in Matthew 12:5 that the priests of Israel were provided immunity from the Sabbath laws so that they could perform the duties of their office unhindered.

13. Article 1, Section 6 – “For any speech or debate in either house, they shall not be questioned in any other place.” This precursor to the freedom of speech provided in the first amendment is based on the teachings of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 and on the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 29:20-21.

14. Article 1, Section 8 – “Congress shall have the power to lay and collect taxes.” The power of the government to collect taxes has been recognized in the Bible from Joseph’s reign in Egypt recorded in Genesis 41 to Christ’s instruction to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesars” in Matthew 22:17-21 and to Paul’s command that we “render to all their dues” in Romans 13:7.

15. Article 1, Section 8 – “To establish an uniform rule of naturalization.” In accordance with this law, Congress was to provide a single process through which citizenship could be obtained by anyone who wished to become an American. Israel also had a “uniform rule of naturalization” by which any stranger could become a Jew. Their process of naturalization which consisted of circumcision and observance of the Passover is outlined in Exodus 12:48. The Israelites also had a process by which those born in the land would become citizens by birth in the third generation as explained in Deuteronomy 23:7-8. The Church in the New Testament also has a single rule of naturalization for all those who wished to become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. That rule which consists only of salvation is outlined in Ephesians 2.

16. Article 1, Section 8 – “To establish... uniform laws on the subject of bankruptcies throughout the United States.” Bankruptcies, like naturalization, are to be governed by a single national law. This was also the case in ancient Israel where all bankruptcies were governed by the law given in Leviticus 25 which established the practice of a year of jubilee.

17. Article 1, Section 8 – “To coin money, regulate the value thereof... and fix the standard

of weights and measures.” This law is based on the biblical mandate to have a just weight as given in Leviticus 19:35-36, Deuteronomy 25:13-16 and Proverbs 11:1.

18. Article 1, Section 8 – “To establish... post roads.” The permission given to congress to establish post roads was foreshadowed by God’s commandment that the Israelite government establish highways between the six cities of refuge. This commandment, given in Deuteronomy 19:3, provides a biblical precept for a government funded system of roadways.

19. Article 1, Section 8 – “To promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries.” The legal basis of America’s copyright system is founded on the biblical teaching that a man should be allowed to live on the fruits of the service which he provides. This principle is explained in I Corinthians 9:9-14 and I Timothy 5:18.

20. Article 1, Section 8 – “To declare war.” The right of governments to declare war is well established in the Bible, and Israel’s right to do so is expressly stated in Numbers 31:3 and Deuteronomy 20:10-12.



21. Article 1, Section 8 – “To... make rules concerning captures on land and water.” This right is also well documented throughout Scripture, but specific instances of its application can be found in Numbers 31:25-31 and I Samuel 3:24.

22. Article 1, Section 8 – “To raise and support armies.” This right stems directly from the right to declare war, and it is founded on God’s instructions to Moses to raise an army from among the Children of Israel in Numbers 31:4-6.

23. Article 1, Section 8 – “To provide for calling forth the militia to execute the laws of the Union.” The power of the government to enforce the law is founded on the explanation given in Romans 13:1-5 that such enforcement is ordained of God for the punishment of evil.

24. Article 1, Section 9 – “The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended.” The right of habeas corpus has been recognized in the Bible from the oldest of its books, for it is the right which Job wished for and which he was granted when he requested that he be provided with a daysman to stand between him and the judgment of God as recorded in Job 9:33. That right is repeatedly mentioned throughout the Bible including New Testament references in I Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 7:25 and I John 2:1; and it

is the core doctrine of Scripture from which the whole of Revelation emanates.

25. Article 1, Section 9 – “No bill of attainder... shall be passed.” This restriction of legislative power is also founded on the Scriptures, for in Deuteronomy 1:17, the judges in Israel were instructed to “hear the small as well as the great”; an instruction which is oft repeated and which when disregarded marked one as an unjust judge as evidenced in Luke 18.

26. Article 1, Section 9 – “No... ex post facto law shall be passed.” According to the Romans 2:12-15, only those who sin in the law are judged by the law: those who do not have the law cannot be judged thereby. This scriptural doctrine is the foundation of the constitutional restriction against ex post facto laws.

27. Article 1, Section 9 – “No preference shall be given by any regulation of commerce or revenue to the ports of one state over those of another.” This law demanding equality on a state level stems directly from the biblical doctrine of individual equality as referenced in Proverbs 28:21 and James 2:1-9, and it follows the example of the mutual respect shared among the twelve tribes of Israel.

28. Article 1, Section 9 – “A regular statement

and account of the receipts and expenditures of all public money shall be published from time to time.” This philosophy of accountability is based on the biblical teaching that we must all give an account for our actions as explained in Romans 14:12, Matthew 18:23, Luke 16:1-8 and I Corinthians 4:2.

29. Article 1, Section 9 – “No title of nobility shall be granted by the United States.” The denial of the nobility in America stems directly from the biblical teaching found in Matthew 23:8-10 and Job 32:21 that we are neither to seek after such titles nor to grant them to others.

30. Article 2, Section 1 – “The electors shall meet in their respective states, and vote by ballot... The person having the greatest number of votes shall be the President.” Our Electoral College system is very similar to the election system established in Israel in many aspects. According to II Samuel 5:3, II Chronicles 23:2-3 and many other passages, the kings of Israel were chosen jointly by the elders of Israel and by the congregation as a whole.

31. Article 2, Section 1 – “No person except a natural born citizen... shall be eligible to the office of President.” The requirement that the President of the United States be a natural born citizen is identical to the biblical mandate

recorded in Deuteronomy 17:14 that any King of Israel must also be a natural born citizen of that nation.

32. Article 2, Section 1 – “The President shall, at stated times, receive for his services, a compensation.” The presidential compensation is based on the teaching to not muzzle the ox which treadeth the corn as explained in I Corinthians 9:9-14 and I Timothy 5:18.

33. Article 2, Section 1 – “Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation: - ‘I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will... preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.’” The terms of the presidential oath are nearly the same as those outlined for the kings of Israel in Deuteronomy 17:18-20. Those kings, like the President, were required to preserve and protect the law of the land.

34. Article 2, Section 2 – “The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” The position of Commander in Chief has been long recognized as one of the responsibilities of the head of state, and that recognition is not without mention in the Scriptures. From Moses to Joshua to David, the Bible always places the responsibility of the nation’s armed forces on the shoulders of its

leader. This great responsibility was acknowledged publicly in I Samuel 8:20 when the Children of Israel first chose to have a king.

35. Article 2, Section 2 – “He shall nominate, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall appoint ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, judges of the Supreme Court, and all other officers of the United States.” The power herein granted to the President to make nominations is founded on a similar practice of the kings of Israel as it is evidenced in I Kings 4:1-19.

36. Article 3, Section 1 – “The judicial power of the United States shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.” The judicial system of America is securely established on the biblical model of the courts of Israel as described in Deuteronomy 1:16-17 and Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

37. Article 3, Section 1 – “The Judges, both of the Supreme and inferior courts, shall hold their offices during good behaviour.” The requirement that judges maintain good behavior is based on an identical command given to the judges of Israel in Deuteronomy 16:20.

38. Article 3, Section 1 – “The Judges... shall,

at stated times, receive for their services a compensation.” This law establishing payment for our Judges is founded on the biblical teaching of I Corinthians 9:9-14 and I Timothy 5:18.

39. Article 3, Section 2 – “The trial of all crimes, except in cases of impeachment, shall be by jury.” The right to a trial by jury is also predicated on the example of Israel. Israel’s reliance on a jury system can be found in both Numbers 35:24-26 and Joshua 20:6.

40. Article 3, Section 3 – “Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying war against them, or in adhering to their enemies.” This definition of treason was a precursor to the freedom of speech which was later to be expressly granted by the first amendment. It is based on the teachings of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 and on the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 29:20-21.

41. Article 3, Section 3 – “No person shall be convicted of treason unless on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act.” This law is nearly identical to that given by Moses in Deuteronomy 17:6 and Deuteronomy 19:15 which also required the testimony of at least two witnesses for convictions.

42. Article 4, Section 1 – “Full faith and credit

shall be given in each state to the public acts, records, and judicial proceedings of every other state.” The full faith and credit clause of the Constitution is based on God’s instruction to Israel to have one manner of law within their borders as explained in Leviticus 24:22 and Exodus 12:49.

43. Article 4, Section 2 – “The citizens of each state shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several states.” This guarantee of privileges stems directly from an application of the scriptural principle of the body of Christ as explained in I Corinthians 12:12-26.

44. Article 4, Section 2 – “A person charged in any state with treason, felony, or other crime, who shall flee from justice, and be found in another state, shall on demand of the executive authority of the state from which he fled, be delivered up.” This cooperation between states in matters of extradition is founded on the instructions given in Deuteronomy 19:11-12.

45. Article 6 – “All debts contracted and engagements entered into, before the adoption of this Constitution, shall be as valid against the United States under this Constitution.” The decision to honor all the debts accrued under the previous government system was made in

recognition of the biblical command given in Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 to “pay that which thou hast vowed.”

46. Article 6 – “The Constitution, and all laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance thereof... shall be the supreme law of the land.” This recognition of a supreme law of the land is based on the same recognition given by Israel to the Law of God. According to Deuteronomy 4:2, Deuteronomy 17:18-20 and Proverbs 30:6, the Law given by Moses superseded all laws which may be given by men.

47. Article 6 – “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” As strange as it might sound, the prohibition against the use of a religious test is also founded on the Bible; for in the laws concerning the choosing of a king given in Deuteronomy 17:14-20; in the laws concerning the election of elders given in Deuteronomy 1:13 and Exodus 18:25; in the laws concerning the appointment of the princes given in Numbers 1:1-16; in all the Law of God, there is not one religious test given as a requirement for holding office.

48. Article 7 – “In the Year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and Eighty seven and of the Independence of the United States of America



the Twelfth.” The concluding line of the Constitution of the United States of America contains direct recognition of its Christian foundation, for in this line our founding fathers publicly recognized the Christian God as their Lord. It is often argued that this line is nothing more than the standard dating method of the day, but a recognition of two facts will successfully assuage such empty accusations – first, that the dates given in the Barbary treaties demonstrate that the reference to the year of our Lord was strictly limited to those nations who considered themselves to be Christian and, second, that the use of an additional dating system based on our nation’s independence reveals that the founding fathers were not in any way required to use a uniquely Christian dating system.

These are just the similarities that I discovered when I did my own comparison of the Constitution and the Bible several years ago. I am sure that many more could be found by those with greater knowledge than I, but the most direct correlation between these two documents is one that is often overlooked. It is found in Article IV, Section 4 of our Constitution which states that “The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government.” This official establishment of a national republic was drawn directly from the

pages of Scripture.

Most historians claim that our founding fathers derived the idea of a republican government from the example of history and the teachings of the enlightenment, but in a discourse delivered before the New York Historical Society, Gouverneur Morris, the very man who penned the words of the Constitution, said that the republican form of government is taught in the Bible and that it was the “form of government which God himself had established” in the nation of Israel.

“The reflection and experience of many years have led me to consider the holy writings, not only as most authentic and instructive in themselves, but as the clue to all other history. They tell us what man is, and they, alone, tell us why he is what he is: a contradictory creature that, seeing and approving what is good, pursues and performs what is evil. All of private and of public life is there displayed. Effects are traced, with unerring accuracy, each to the real cause. ... From the same Fountain of Wisdom we learn that vice destroys freedom; that arbitrary power is founded on public immorality, and that misconduct in those who rule a republic, necessary consequence of general licentiousness, so disgusts and degrades the nation, that, dead to generous sentiment, they become willing slaves.

... Here is a profound lesson of political wisdom, given long before Aristotle's Ethics, very long before Machiavel's Discourses on the first Decade of Livy, and still longer before Montesquieu's Spirit of Laws. When the last of these authors, in sprightly repetition of his predecessors, tells us that virtue is the principle of republics, he offers human testimony to confirm divine authority. That form of government which God himself had established, that code of laws which God himself had promulgated, those institutions which infinite wisdom had provided, in special relation to the climate, soil, and situation of the country, to the genius, temper, and character of the people, became intolerable from the prevalence of vice and impiety. ... There must be religion. When that ligament is torn, society is disjointed, and its members perish. The nation is exposed to foreign violence and domestic convulsions. Vicious rulers, chosen by a vicious people, turn back the current of corruption to its source.”<sup>69</sup>

And Mr. Morris was not the only of our founding fathers to make this claim. Dr. Rush also wrote of the biblical foundation of the republican model of government in his “Defence of the Use of the Bible in Schools.” Dr. Rush wrote:

“In contemplating the political institutions of the

United States, I lament, that we waste so much time and money in punishing crimes, and take so little pains to prevent them. We profess to be republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government, that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of christianity, by means of the bible; for this divine book, above all others, favours that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues, which constitute the soul of republicanism.”<sup>70</sup>

Nor were the founding fathers alone in their recognition of the republican form of government as that which is most clearly taught in the Scriptures. As Mr. Morris pointed out, the Baron of Montesquieu also recognized the republican principles of the Bible. He wrote that:

“The Christian religion, which ordains that men should love each other, would, without doubt, have every nation blest with the best civil, the best political laws; because these, next to this religion, are the greatest good that men can give and receive.”<sup>71</sup>

Later in the same book he concluded that:

“The Catholic Religion is most agreeable to a Monarchy, and the Protestant to a Republic.”<sup>72</sup>

And nearly five hundred years prior to the writings of the Baron of Montesquieu, the Dominican priest, Thomas Aquinas described the republican nature of the government of ancient Israel. He wrote:

“Accordingly, the best form of government is in a state or kingdom, where one is given the power to preside over all; while under him are others having governing powers: and yet a government of this kind is shared by all, both because all are eligible to govern, and because the rulers are chosen by all. For this is the best form of polity, being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly aristocracy, in so far as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e. government by the people, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers. Such was the form of government established by the Divine Law. For Moses and his successors governed the people in such a way that each of them was ruler over all; so that there was a kind of kingdom. Moreover, seventy-two men were chosen, who were elders in virtue: for it is written (Deut. i. 15): I took out of your tribes men wise and honorable, and

appointed them rulers: so that there was an element of aristocracy. But it was a democratical government in so far as the rulers were chosen from all the people; for it is written (Exod. xviii. 21): Provide out of all the people wise (Vulg., – able) men, etc.; and, again, in so far as they were chosen by the people; wherefore it is written (Deut. i. 13): Let me have from among you wise (Vulg., – able) men, etc. Consequently it is evident that the ordering of the rulers was well provided for by the Law.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus it is evident that the very fabric of the American government is the same as that from which God Himself shaped the government of ancient Israel. The republican nature of Israel’s government has been taught among Christians for centuries, and it is no wonder at all that our founding fathers would adopt such a system as their own. In their minds, it was impossible to have a successful republican government that was not established upon the principles of the Bible. As Jedidiah Morse once wrote:

“Our dangers are of two kinds, those which affect our religion, and those which affect our government. They are, however, so closely allied that they cannot, with propriety, be separated. The foundations which support the interests of Christianity, are also necessary to

support a free and equal government like our own. In all those countries where there is little or no religion, or a very gross and corrupt one, as in Mahometan and Pagan countries, there you will find, with scarcely a single exception, arbitrary and tyrannical governments, gross ignorance and wickedness, and deplorable wretchedness among the people. To the kindly influence of Christianity we owe that degree of civil freedom, and political and social happiness which mankind now enjoy. In proportion as the genuine effects of Christianity are diminished in any nation, either through unbelief, or the corruption of its doctrines, or the neglect of its institutions; in the same proportions will the people of that nation recede from the blessings of genuine freedom, and approximate the miseries of complete despotism. I hold this to be a truth confirmed by experience. If so, it follows, that all efforts made to destroy the foundations of our holy religion, ultimately tend to the subversion also of our political freedom and happiness. Whenever the pillars of Christianity shall be overthrown, our present republican forms of government, and all the blessings which flow from them must fall with them.”<sup>74</sup>

So where does all of this leave us? We have seen that most of the key founders referenced in Mr. Pinto’s film were Christian men intent on

establishing a government that conformed to the principles of the Bible, and we have observed that the founders themselves claimed that it was only by the wisdom and power of God that they succeeded in that task. Moreover, we have discovered that the Constitution bears the mark of biblical influence, and that without that influence, it never would have succeeded. In short, we can now state with definite assurance that Mr. Pinto's film is fatally flawed.

The fathers of this nation did not rely on their own wisdom and cunning in order to develop a secular government with the hopes of overthrowing the Christian religion. Had they done so, they would have failed miserably. The truth of the matter is that our founding fathers had no wisdom of their own with which to create a new government. Their only means of success was their unabated faith in the wisdom of their Creator.

The failure of the human wisdom of the founding fathers and the success of their faith in the wisdom of God is amply illustrated in the request for prayer which was put forth by Benjamin Franklin during the Constitutional Convention.

“The small progress we have made after 4 or five weeks close attendance & continual



reasonings with each other, our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many noes and ays, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, some we have been running about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Government, and examined the different forms of those Republics which having been formed with the seeds of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have viewed Modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our circumstances.

“In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with G. Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a Superintending providence in our favor. To that kind providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in

peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that ‘except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it.’ I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and bye word down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom and leave it to chance, war and conquest.

“I therefore beg leave to move, that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the Clergy of the City be requested to officiate in that service.”

Many a historian has lamented Mr. Thomson’s decision not to write a history of the Revolution,

and I am certainly to be counted among their number. Had he written such a history, we would have yet another source from which to prove that our nation was founded as a Christian nation, but I am not so naïve as to believe that Mr. Thomson's account would have changed the conclusion of Mr. Pinto's film. Mr. Pinto had to hide an enormous number of facts from his audience in order to arrive at that conclusion, and it is not likely that a single book added to that number would have made any difference.

Having finished my review of Mr. Pinto's film and having exposed its numerous errors, I am reminded once again of the words of Gouverneur Morris. I conclude with his statement regarding false histories, and I cannot help but imagine him presenting these words as his own analysis of Mr. Pinto's film.

“Not only those who have participated in the conduct of national affairs, but those also, whose attention has been engrossed by personal concerns, cannot have failed to observe, that facts, as well as motives, are frequently misrepresented. That events are attributed to causes which never existed, while the real causes remain concealed. Presumptuous writers affecting knowledge they do not possess, undertake to instruct mankind by specious stories

founded on idle rumour and vague conjecture. Those who are well informed smile at the folly.”<sup>75</sup>

# What about the Religious Test Clause?

Ever since the Constitution was first submitted for ratification, the final clause in Article VI has been a matter of strong contention among Americans. That clause, known as the religious test clause, simply states that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” It is frequently claimed that this clause represents the desire of the founding fathers to keep religion out of the government and to establish a secular nation. But is that really how this phrase was intended to be used?

To understand the true purpose of the religious test clause, we must hearken back to the Corporation Act of 1661. This was the first of three Test Acts which were implemented in England and which remained in effect until 1828. Under these acts, no one could hold office in England unless he swore an oath of fealty not to God but rather to the doctrines of the Church of England. This was the kind of religious test which the founders prohibited. They had no objection to biblical qualifications. What they objected to was the requirement that all government officials be forced to swear

allegiance to the codified doctrines of an established church.

The wisdom of this objection can be illustrated by an examination of the different doctrines of the Christian churches on baptism. Some churches teach that baptism is necessary in order for one to become a Christian while others teach that baptism is not necessary but merely symbolic. There is no reconciliation between these two views. Those holding to the first view often deny the Christianity of those holding to the second and vice versa. Therefore, if the founding fathers had permitted religious tests by saying that only Christians could hold office under the new Constitution, they would have placed us in the difficult position of allowing our government to determine which of these two views on baptism is correct. The churches would immediately have recognized that whichever church managed to obtain a majority representation in the new government would have the power to define all other denominations as non-Christians and force them out of the political arena entirely. This is exactly how the Test Acts were used in England, and it was one of the reasons that so many Christians had fled to America in the first place. Our founding fathers realized that the only way to prevent this abuse of the power of government is to eliminate the

religious test requirements altogether.

That this is the view which the founders had in mind can be seen in the statement on this clause by Oliver Ellsworth. Ellsworth was one of the pivotal drafters of the Constitution, and he later became the third Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. In his defense of the religious test clause, Ellsworth first explained what was meant by the term “religious test”:

“A religious test is an act to be done, or profession to be made, relating to religion (such as partaking of the sacrament according to certain rites and forms, or declaring one’s belief of certain doctrines,) for the purpose of determining whether his religious opinions are such, that he is admissible to a publick office.”<sup>76</sup>

He then proceeded to examine the most basic religious test possible and to demonstrate that it would be wrong for us to have such a test in America.

If any test-act were to be made, perhaps the least exceptionable would be one, requiring all persons appointed to office to declare at the time of their admission, their belief in the being of a God, and in the divine authority of the scriptures ... But I answer: His making a declaration of

such a belief is no security at all. For suppose him to be an unprincipled man, who believes neither the word nor the being of God; and to be governed merely by selfish motives; how easy is it for him to dissemble! how easy is it for him to make a public declaration of his belief in the creed which the law prescribes; and excuse himself by calling it a mere formality. This is the case with the test-laws and creeds in England ... In short, test-laws are utterly ineffectual: they are no security at all ... If they exclude any persons, it will be honest men, men of principle, who will rather suffer an injury, than act contrary to the dictates of their consciences. If we mean to have those appointed to public offices, who are sincere friends to religion, we, the people who appoint them, must take care to choose such characters; and not rely upon such cob-web barriers as test-laws are.”

The final sentence of Ellsworth’s statement brings us back to our original question. Did the founders include the religious test clause in order to establish a secular government? Not at all. They simply placed the responsibility for the religious character of our government on the shoulders of the people themselves. If we have men in office today who are enemies to the Christian faith, then it is not the fault of the founding fathers but solely that of we the people.



Ellsworth wasn't alone in this view of the test clause. In an address made to George Washington in 1789 by the ministers of the First Presbytery of the Eastward said:

“Among the objections to the Federal Constitution we have never considered the want of a Religious Test, that grand engine of persecution in every tyrant's hand.”<sup>77</sup>

Joseph Story addressed this clause in his Commentaries on the Constitution by explaining that it was intended to prohibit laws similar to the English Corporation Act and Test Acts. He then state that:

“It is easy to foresee, that without some prohibition of religious tests, a successful sect, in our country, might, by once possessing power, pass test-laws, which would secure to themselves a monopoly of all the offices of trust and profit, under the national government.”<sup>78</sup>

Tench Coxe expressed a similar view of this clause when he explained that:

“In England every Presbyterian, and other person not of their established church, is incapable of

holding an office. No such impious deprivation of the rights of men can take place under the new foederal constitution.”<sup>79</sup>

Oliver Wollcott also understood the religious test clause in this manner when he said:

“For myself, I should be content either with or without that clause in the Constitution which excludes test laws. Knowledge and liberty are so prevalent in this country, that I do not believe that the United States would ever be disposed to establish one religious sect, and lay all others under legal disabilities. But as we know not what may take place hereafter, and any such test would be exceedingly injurious to the rights of free citizens, I cannot think it altogether superfluous to have added a clause, which secures us from the possibility of such oppression.”<sup>80</sup>

We could also consider the statement by Mr. Shute in the Massachusetts Ratifying Convention:

“To object to the latter part of the paragraph under consideration, which excludes a religious test, is, I am sensible, very popular; for the most of men, somehow, are rigidly tenacious of their own sentiments in religion, and disposed to

impose them upon others as the standard of truth.”

Then we have this statement from Edmund Randolph, another pivotal member of the Constitutional Convention:

“Although officers, &c. are to swear that they will support this constitution, yet they are not bound to support one mode of worship, or to adhere to one particular sect.”<sup>81</sup>

In addition to these men, the record includes the following statement from Mr. Payson:

“Relying on the candor of this Convention, I shall take the liberty to express my sentiments on the nature of a religious test, and shall endeavor to do it in such propositions as will meet the approbation of every mind. The great object of religion being God supreme, and the seat of religion in man being the heart or conscience, i.e., the reason God has given us, employed on our moral actions, in their most important consequences, as related to the tribunal of God, hence I infer that God alone is the God of the conscience, and, consequently, attempts to erect human tribunals for the consciences of men are impious encroachments upon the prerogatives of God. Upon these principles, had there been a

religious test as a qualification for office, it would in my opinion, have been a great blemish upon the instrument.”<sup>82</sup>

And then there is this statement from Mr. Backus:

“I now beg leave to offer a few thoughts upon some points in the Constitution proposed to us, and I shall begin with the exclusion of any religious test. Many appear to be much concerned about it; but nothing is more evident, both in reason and the Holy Scriptures, than that religion is ever a matter between God and individuals; and, therefore, no man or men can impose any religious test, without invading the essential prerogatives of our Lord Jesus Christ ... Some serious minds discover a concern lest, if all religious tests should be excluded, the Congress would hereafter establish Popery, or some other tyrannical way of worship. But it is most certain that no such way of worship can be established without any religious test.”<sup>83</sup>

In the North Carolina ratifying convention, James Iredell, who was later to become one of our first Supreme Court Justices said:

“I did not expect any objection to this particular regulation, which, in my opinion, is calculated to

prevent evils of the most pernicious consequences to society. Every person in the least conversant in the history of mankind, knows what dreadful mischiefs have been committed by religious persecutions. Under the color of religious tests, the utmost cruelties have been exercised. Those in power have generally considered all wisdom centered in themselves; that they alone had a right to dictate to the rest of mankind; and that all opposition to their tenets was profane and impious. The consequence of this intolerant spirit had been, that each church has in turn set itself up against every other...

Were we to judge from the examples of religious tests in other countries, we should be persuaded that they do not answer the purpose for which they are intended. What is the consequence of such in England? In that country no man can be a member in the House of Commons, or hold any office under the crown, without taking the sacrament according to the rites of the Church ... The intention was, to exclude all persons from offices but the members of the Church of England. Yet it is notorious that dissenters qualify themselves for offices in this manner, though they never conform to the Church on any other occasion; and men of no religion at all have no scruple to make use of this qualification. It never was known that a man who had no

principles of religion hesitated to perform any rite when it was convenient for his private interest. No test can bind such a one...

But it is objected that the people of America may, perhaps, choose representatives who have no religion at all, and that pagans and Mahometans may be admitted into offices. But how is it possible to exclude and set of men, without taking away that principle of religious freedom which we ourselves so warmly contend for? This is the foundation on which persecution has been raised in every part of the world. The people in power were always right, and every body else wrong. If you admit the least difference, the door to persecution is opened.”<sup>84</sup>

Gov. Johnston rose to speak after Mr. Iredell. Here is his statement in full:

“I read the Constitution over and over, but could not see one cause of apprehension or jealousy on this subject. When I heard there were apprehensions that the pope of Rome could be the President of the United States, I was greatly astonished. It might as well be said that the king of England or France, or the Grand Turk, could be chosen to that office. It would have been as good an argument. It appears to me that it would have been dangerous, if Congress could

intermeddle with the subject of religion. True religion is derived from a much higher source than human laws. When any attempt is made, by any government, to restrain men's consciences, no good consequence can possibly follow. It is apprehended that Jews, Mahometans, pagans, &c., may be elected to high offices under the government of the United States. Those who are Mahometans, or any others who are not professors of the Christian religion, can never be elected to the office of President, or other high office, but in one of two cases. First, if the people of America lay aside the Christian religion altogether, it may happen. Should this unfortunately take place, the people will choose such men as think as they do themselves. Another case is, if any persons of such descriptions should notwithstanding their religion, acquire the confidence and esteem of the people of America by their good conduct and practice of virtue, they may be chosen. I leave to gentlemen's candor to judge what probability there is of the people's choosing men of different sentiments from themselves.

But great apprehensions have been raised as to the influence of the Eastern States. When you attend to circumstances, this will have no weight. I know but two or three states where there is the least chance of establishing any particular

religion. The people of Massachusetts and Connecticut are mostly Presbyterians. In every other state, the people are divided into a great number of sects. In Rhode Island, the tenets of the Baptists, I believe, prevail. In New York, they are divided very much: the most numerous are the Episcopalians and the Baptists. in New Jersey, they are as much divided as we are. In Pennsylvania, if any sect prevails more than others, it is that of the Quakers. In Maryland, the Episcopalians are most numerous, though there are other sects. In Virginia, there are many sects; you all know what their religious sentiments are. So in all the Southern States they differ; as also in New Hampshire. I hope therefore, that gentlemen will see there is no cause of fear that any one religion shall be exclusively established.”

After Gov. Johnston’s speech there was an objection made to the religious test clause by Mr. Caldwell who desired to prevent non-Christians from immigrating to America. He said that:

“Those gentlemen who formed this Constitution should not have given this invitation to Jews and heathens. All those who have any religion are against the emigration of those people from the eastern hemisphere.”



In response to this, Mr. Spencer also voiced his opinion on the matter:

“Gentlemen urge that the want of a test admits the most vicious characters to offices. I desire to know what test could bind them. If they were of such principles, it would not keep them from enjoying those offices. On the other hand, it would exclude from offices conscientious and truly religious people, though equally capable as others. Conscientious persons would not take such an oath, and would be therefore excluded. this would be a great cause of objection to a religious test. But in this case, as there is not a religious test required, it leaves religion on the solid foundation of its own inherent validity, without any connection with temporal authority; and no kind of oppression can take place. I confess it strikes me so. I am sorry to differ from the worthy gentleman. I cannot object to this part of the Constitution.”

Gov. Johnston then spoke again, and his comment ended the discussion of this issue. Here is the record of his statement:

“He admitted a possibility of Jews, pagans, &c., emigrating to the United States; yet, he said, they could not be in proportion to the emigration of Christians who should come from other

countries; that, in all probability, the children even of such people would be Christians; and that this, with the rapid population of the United States, their zeal for religion, and love of liberty, would, he trusted, add to the progress of the Christian religion among us.”

As you can see, there was a lot of discussion of this particular clause of the Constitution among the people of the founding era. Most of the nation was in favor of the clause, but there was a significant number who opposed it. However, there were very few who did not recognize it for what it was – a rejection of the kind of test acts that had produced centuries of religious persecution in Europe. The modern view that the religious test clause was designed to keep the government free from any and all influence of religion would have been rejected by both sides of the debate as preposterous.

# Adams, Jefferson and the General Principles of Christianity

One of the major points of contention in the discussion of America's Christian foundation is found in a reference that John Adams made to the "general principles of Christianity." Those who support the idea that America was founded on Christian principles often present this statement as evidence in their favor, while those who disagree with them usually respond by pointing to the context of the statement as evidence for their position. Unfortunately, most of those discussing Adams' statement seem to be operating under the impression that it was made in a vacuum. In this article, I will attempt to provide a full analysis of Adams' letter and demonstrate that when we consider all of the variables in their proper order, it becomes clear that this letter supports the claim that America was founded on principles that are unique to Christianity.

In 1798 and during the Presidency of John Adams, America entered what is known as the Quasi-War with France. Thomas Jefferson was Adams' Vice President, and he was an outspoken opponent of this war. In May of that year, an

assembly of young men in Philadelphia made an address to President Adams in response to the XYZ affair in which officials of the French government had demanded a bribe in exchange for peace.

In this address, these young men expressed their disdain for the insults of the French, praised Adams for his wisdom and pledged to give their lives in the service of their country. They also drew a parallel between the actions of the French against America and the actions of the British during the time leading up to the Revolution. This parallel was so distinct in their minds that they claimed to be "Actuated by the same principles on which our forefathers achieved their Independence." It was on the grounds of these principles that they wrote, "As our ancestors have magnanimously resisted the encroachments of the one, we will no less vigorously oppose the attacks of the other."<sup>85</sup>

Of course, this letter was very encouraging to Adams, and he immediately published a response in which he wrote:

"Nothing of the kind could be more welcome to me than this address from the ingenuous youth of Philadelphia in their virtuous anxiety to preserve the honor and independence of their country."

Adams' full response can be read in the ninth volume of *The Works of John Adams*. In that response, Adams made the following statement:

"Science and morals are the great pillars on which this country has been raised to its present population, opulence, and prosperity; and these alone can advance, support, and preserve it. Without wishing to damp the ardor of curiosity, or influence the freedom of inquiry, I will hazard a prediction, that after the most industrious and impartial researches, the longest liver of you all will find no principles, institutions, or systems of education more fit, in general, to be transmitted to your posterity than those you have received from your ancestors."<sup>86</sup>

Jefferson apparently took offence at this statement, and in a letter to Joseph Priestley a year and a half later, he wrote:

"Pardon, I pray you, the temporary delirium which has been excited here, but which is fast passing away. The Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind, and to recur to the annals of our ancestors for what is most perfect in government, in religion & in learning, is worthy of those bigots in religion & government, by whom it has been recommended,

& whose purposes it would answer."<sup>87</sup>

And in another letter, written a year later, he wrote:

"What an effort, my dear sir, of bigotry in politics and religion have we gone through! The barbarians really flattered themselves they should be able to bring back the times of Vandalism, when ignorance put everything into the hands of power and priestcraft. All advances in science were proscribed as innovations; they pretended to praise and encourage education, but it was to be the education of our ancestors; we were to look backwards, not forwards, for improvement; the President himself declaring in one of his answers to addresses, that we were never to expect to go beyond them in real science."<sup>88</sup>

This second letter was somehow obtained by Thomas Belsham and published as part of the collection of correspondences in his book, *The Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey*. Adams managed to read a copy of this book when four of them were brought to Boston in 1813. Upon reading Jefferson's comment, Adams promptly wrote to his former Vice-President and demanded an explanation in the following words:

"The sentiment that you have attributed to me in your letter to Dr. Priestley, I totally disclaim, and demand, in the French sense of the word, of you the proof. It is totally incongruous to every principle of my mind and every sentiment of my heart for three score years at least."<sup>89</sup>

Jefferson responded by saying:

"The readers of my letter should be cautioned not to confine its view to this country alone. England and its alarmists were equally under consideration. Still less must they consider it as looking personally towards you. You happen, indeed, to be quoted, because you happened to express more pithily than had been done by themselves, one of the mottos of the party. This was in your answer to the address of the young men of Philadelphia. One of the questions, you know, on which our parties took different sides, was on the improvability of the human mind in science, in ethics, in government, &c. Those who advocated reformation of institutions, *pari passu* with the progress of science, maintained that no definite limits could be assigned to that progress. The enemies of reform, on the other hand, denied improvement, and advocated steady adherence to the principles, practices and institutions of our fathers, which they represented as the consummation of wisdom, and acme of

excellence, beyond which the human mind could never advance. Although in the passage of your answer alluded to, you expressly disclaim the wish to influence the freedom of inquiry, you predict that that will produce nothing more worthy of transmission to posterity than the principles, institutions and systems of education received from their ancestors. I do not consider this as your deliberate opinion."<sup>90</sup>

Here we see what Jefferson was actually opposing in his letter to Priestley. He was opposed to the idea that the level of human understanding at that time could never be improved upon, and he thought that Adams' response to the young men of Philadelphia conveyed this sentiment. This is the point at which Adams wrote the letter containing his famous statement regarding the general principles of Christianity.<sup>91</sup> (This letter is available online in the tenth volume of *The Works of John Adams*, and I have provided a link to it in footnote number seven.) Adams asked Jefferson to remember that the young Philadelphians had claimed to be "actuated by the same principles on which our forefathers achieved their independence," and he pointed out that his statement regarding the "great pillars" of the Revolution should be considered as a response to that claim. In this letter to Jefferson,



when Adams quoted himself as saying, "the longest liver of you all will find no principles, institutions, or systems of education more fit, *in general*, to be transmitted to your posterity than those you have received from your ancestors," he emphasized the phrase "in general" and then proceeded to explain what he had meant by referring to general principles.

To explain this statement, Adams first asked the question, "Who composed that army of fine young fellows that was then before my eyes?" Before considering the answer which Adams provided for this question, it is important that we first understand which "army of fine young fellows" he was speaking of. Warren Throckmorton, among others, has erroneously concluded that Adams was "Speaking about the patriots who made up the revolution,"<sup>92</sup> but we can see from a statement appearing later in Adams letter that he was not referring to the army of the Revolution. Adams wrote:

"The *general principles* on which the fathers achieved independence, were the only principles in which that beautiful assembly of young men could unite, and these principles only could be intended by them in their address, or by me in my answer."

It is obvious from this statement that the assembly of young men which Adams had before his eyes when writing about general principles was the same assembly which wrote an address to him and to whom he had written an answer. This means that Adams' listing of the beliefs of these young men should not be understood to be a list of the beliefs of the men fighting in the Revolution but rather a listing of the beliefs which were held by the young men of Philadelphia in 1798. Adams listed those beliefs as:

“Roman Catholics, English Episcopalians, Scotch and American Presbyterians, Methodists, Moravians, Anabaptists, German Lutherans, German Calvinists, Universalists, Arians, Priestleyans, Socinians, Independents, Congregationalists, Horse Protestants, and House Protestants, Deists and Atheists, and Protestants ‘*qui ne croyent rien.*’ [Usually translated as: Protestants who believe nothing]”

Now, it is often claimed that, when Adams spoke here of the general principles of Christianity, he was speaking only of principles which are also held by “Deists, Atheists and Protestants who believe nothing,” but this claim overlooks several particulars of Adams' statement. Before we look at those particulars, however, let me first offer an explanation for the term

“Protestants who believe nothing.” Gregg Frazer emphasizes this phrase in his book and mocks it in his speeches to show how ludicrous it is for anyone to think that Adams could have been referring to uniquely Christian principles, but it is quite possible that Adams was referring to a denomination similar to the present-day Churches of Christ (not to be confused with the United Church of Christ). These churches trace their history back to James O’Kelly who, in 1793 “withdrew from the Baltimore conference of his church and called upon others to join him in taking the Bible as the only creed.”<sup>93</sup> The Church of Christ website answers the question, “Does the church of Christ have a creed?” with this statement:

“No. At least, there is no creed in the usual sense of the word. The belief of the church is stated fully and completely in the Bible. There is no other manual or discipline to which the members of the church of Christ give their allegiance.”<sup>94</sup>

These churches could easily have been called “Protestants who believe nothing” because of their unusual determination not to adhere to any creed, yet their doctrine is still uniquely Christian. If Adams was referring to churches of this type, then there is no need to consider why he listed them as adhering to the general

principles of Christianity. We can therefore limit our discussion to the Adams' reference to Deists and Atheists.

When considering Adams' reference to Deists and Atheists, it is important to note two additional statements which he made in this letter. First, it is imperative that we not skip over Adams' statement that these young men were "all educated in the *general principles* of Christianity." The second fact to keep in mind is that Adams only referred to the "general principles of Christianity, in which all those sects were united," but Deists and Atheists cannot properly be considered as members of a sect. The word "sect" refers to "a group within an organized religion whose adherents recognize a special set of teachings or practices."<sup>95</sup> Thus, when Adams referred to principles "in which all those sects were united," he was referring to all of those in his list who claimed to be Christians. This conclusion is supported by the fact that immediately after Adams spoke of the general principles of Christianity which united all of the sects, he then added "the *general principles* of English and American liberty, in which all those young men united." If by the term "sects" Adams had intended to include all of those in his list, then there would have been no need for him to make a separate reference to the young men. He

could have simply written:

“What were these *general principles*? I answer, the general principles of Christianity and the *general principles* of English and American liberty, in which all those young men united.”

Adams was attempting to explain his position in clear and unmistakable terms, and in doing so, he intentionally referred to the principles that united the various sects of Christianity **and** to the principles that united the young men of Philadelphia in 1798. Thus, Adams provided two sets of “*general principles* on which the fathers achieved independence” – the general principles of Christianity and the general principles of English and American liberty.

These two sets of principles correlate perfectly with Adams’ previous statement that, “Science and morals are the great pillars on which this country has been raised to its present population, opulence, and prosperity.” The general principles of English and American liberty are the pillar that he referred to as science, and the general principles of Christianity make up the pillar which he referred to as morals. That Jefferson would have understood this correlation can be seen in his earlier letter to Priestley in which he referred to Adams’ statement about science and morals as “bigotry in politics and

religion.”

At this point in the discussion, we can see clearly that general principals of Christianity which Adams mentioned were not limited to principles that Christians shared with Deists and Atheists. The particular Deists and Atheists that Adams mentioned had all been educated in the general principles of Christianity. They were not members of the sects which held to those general principles, and they were only mentioned as agreeing with the general principles of English and American liberty. This means that when Adams referred to the general principles of Christianity, he would have been including such principles as the existence of God, His intervention in the affairs of men and His revelation to them of His will. This is the only explanation of these principles that makes sense of the opening paragraph of Adams’ letter in which he wrote:

“Poor weak man! when will thy perfection arrive? Thy perfectibility I shall not deny, for a greater character than Priestley or Godwin has said, ‘Be ye perfect.’”

Here, in the same letter from which some would have us believe that Adams thought the general principles of Christianity to be inclusive of deism and atheism, we find Adams himself

recognizing the existence of God and the authority of the Scriptures.

At this point, those who disagree with me are undoubtedly sputtering that I have ignored Adams' reference to Hume, Rousseau and Voltaire, so let's take a look at that portion of the letter as well.

After mentioning the general principles of Christianity and the general principles of English and American liberty, Adams explained why it is so important to recognize that he was referring to *general* principles and not specific teachings. In this portion of his letter, he wrote:

“Now I will avow, that I then believed and now believe that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God; and that those principles of liberty are as unalterable as human nature and our terrestrial, mundane system. I could, therefore safely say, consistently with all my then and present information, that I believed they would never make discoveries in contradiction to these *general principles*.”

This statement indicates that the principles which Adams referred to *general* principles are those principles which we would refer to today as *timeless* principles. They are principles which

are true of all ages of the world – past, present and future. The timeless principles of Christianity would include the statement of Christ that “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”<sup>96</sup> In the category of English and American liberty, these principles would include the statement “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>97</sup> It was to timeless principles such as these that Adams was referring when he told the young men of Philadelphia that they would never discover principles more fit for passing on to their children.

In his letter to Jefferson, Adams added an additional statement about these general or timeless principles. He wrote:

“In favor of these *general principles*, in philosophy, religion, and government, I could fill sheets of quotations from Frederic of Prussia, from Hume, Gibbon, Bolingbroke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, as well as Newton and Locke; not to mention thousands of divines and philosophers of inferior fame.”



According to Jonathan Rowe and many other writers, this statement shows that the principles which Adams recognized as the general principles of Christianity can be found in the writings of men like Hume, Rousseau and Voltaire,<sup>98</sup> but that is not what Adams actually said. He did not say that he could provide quotes of these principles from the given list of men. Rather, he said that he could provide quotes “in favor of” those principles. To give a quote from someone in favor of a particular principle does not necessarily mean that the person quoted must himself be in favor of that principle. We could, for example, quote Mark Antony refusing to demonstrate love and forgiveness toward his enemy Augustus and use this quote in favor of the timeless principles of love and forgiveness. In fact, we have a record of Adams doing this very thing. In a letter to his wife, he wrote:

“Our Saviour taught the Immorality of Revenge, and the moral Duty of forgiving Injuries, and even the Duty of loving Enemies. Nothing can shew the amiable, the moral, and divine Excellency of these Christian Doctrines in a stronger Point of Light, than the Characters and Conduct of Marius and Sylla, Caesar, Pompey, Anthony and Augustus, among innumerable others.”<sup>99</sup>

All of the names listed in this letter were examples of men who failed to abide by the principles taught by Christ, and yet Adams lists them as among the best demonstrations of the truth of those principles. He was using their failures to prove the excellency of that principle which they rejected, and it is likely that he was employing this same tactic in his letter to Jefferson. He did not mention the writings of men like Hume, Rousseau and Voltaire as sources of the general principles of Christianity but rather to prove his claim that the principles of Christianity really are eternal and immutable. It is as if he was asking “If the writings of men like Hume, Rousseau and Voltaire can do nothing to refute the general principles of Christianity, then why shouldn’t I say that the young men of Philadelphia will never be able to refute them either?”

Thus, it should be clear that when John Adams said that the founding fathers achieved independence through the general principles of Christianity, he was not referring to principles which are held by men who believe nothing, by Deists and Atheists or by philosophers such as Hume, Rousseau and Voltaire. He was referring to the same timeless principles of the Bible which are “as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God,” but just in case

there are those who still hold to the opposite opinion, let's continue on and give our consideration to the final paragraph of Adams' letter.

In that paragraph, Adams told Jefferson that he thought his "sentiments were sufficiently known to have protected me against suspicions of narrow thoughts." He then explained that Jefferson should have been able to ascertain his view on this topic from the preface to his book *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* which had been published in 1787. He asked Jefferson to "read again that whole page, and then say whether the writer of it could be suspected of recommending to youth 'to look backward instead of forward,' for instruction and improvement." If we were to fulfill this request ourselves, we would find that not only did Adams recognize the continuous advancement of the sciences, but he also made reference to the timeless principles of Christianity upon which our nation was founded. Here are two excerpts from that preface:

"The people in America have now the best opportunity, and the greatest trust, in their hands, that Providence ever committed to so small a number, since the transgression of the first pair: if they betray their trust, their guilt will merit even greater punishment than other nations have

suffered, and the indignation of heaven.”<sup>100</sup>

And:

“It can no longer be called in question, whether authority in magistrates, and obedience of citizens, can be grounded on reason, morality, and the Christian religion, without the monkery of priests, or the knavery of politicians.”<sup>101</sup>

The body of Adams’ book contains many more statements regarding the principles of Christianity, but a mere listing of them would fill an additional four pages of text. For now, however, I will simply leave you with the full assurance that when John Adams said that our nation was founded on the general principles of Christianity, he really was speaking of the principles of Christianity and not just of some watered down list of the ethics that Christians have in common with Atheists.

## **The Conversion of Benjamin Franklin**

On March 9, 1790, just one month before his death at age 84, Benjamin Franklin penned a letter to Ezra Stiles in which he said that he had some doubts about the deity of Christ.<sup>102</sup> This

letter has often been cited as evidence that Franklin rejected Christianity and maintained his skepticism until his death. I was recently confronted with this claim again, and I decided that I would take the time to read Franklin's writings in chronological order to see if it might be possible to trace out his spiritual journey. As I did so, I was shocked to discover that this iconic figure of the Revolution had documented his own, spiritual revolution in clear detail revealing to all the world his conversion from skeptical deism to a full faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Here is a brief synopsis of what I found.

Benjamin Franklin was raised in a Christian home, but according to his autobiography, he decided to become a deist at the age of fifteen after reading several books on the subject. He soon began to doubt this decision, however, and he wrote that "I began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful." Franklin moved to London at the age of seventeen while still a deist, and during that stay, he published a pamphlet with the motto, "Whatever is, is right." It was during this time, that Franklin really began to doubt the truth of deism, and he recorded in his autobiography that he "doubted whether some error had not insinuated itself unperceived into my argument."

He then said that he "grew convinced that truth, sincerity, and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life." It was about his conclusions of this time that Franklin wrote, "Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such;" and he concluded that it was "the kind hand of Providence" which preserved him during this "dangerous time of youth."<sup>103</sup>

Franklin returned from London in 1726, and two years later he wrote out his "Articles of Belief."<sup>104</sup> The wording of this document is consistent with the time period after his rejection of deism but before his acceptance of the Bible as revelation from God. This transitional phase appears to have continued through 1731 when Franklin wrote his outline of "Doctrine to be Preached." In the mere ten lines of this outline that have been recovered, there is no reference to Scripture. There is, however, a marked difference between this outline and the "Articles of Belief" which Franklin had written three years prior. In this outline, Franklin completely abandoned his earlier concept of God as merely the God of our solar system with other God's above Him and instead fully embraced a single God whom he identified as the "Father of the Universe." Franklin's "Doctrine to be Preached"

described God as "infinitely good, Powerful and wise" as well as "omnipresent." At this time, Franklin also recognized the existence of an afterlife and wrote that men "are made more happy or miserable after this Life according to their Actions."<sup>105</sup>

This brings us to the consideration of Franklin's 1732 article "On the Providence of God in the Government of the World" in which he argued for the intervention of God in the affairs of men. This argument agrees with Franklin's "Doctrine to be Preached" of the previous year in that it was predicated on "the Existence of a Deity and that he is the Creator of the Universe." It also agreed in the claim that God is infinitely wise, powerful and good. The 1732 article, however, introduced several additional concepts which are not seen in the remnants of the earlier outline, though they might have been in the portions which have been lost. In particular, Franklin's 1732 article included the conclusion "that the Deity sometimes interferes by his particular Providence, and sets aside the Events which would otherwise have been produc'd in the Course of Nature, or by the Free Agency of Men." This conclusion marks the first indication that Franklin recognized God's direct interference in the actions of men, and it is also the first evidence of Franklin's acknowledgement

of the free will of man. This article also marks the first record we have of Franklin saying that men should pray to God for "his Favour and Protection." His previous prayer in the "Articles of Belief" was primarily focused on praising God, and the request in that prayer was only for aid in maintaining good virtue. The 1732 article, by contrast, stated that men should pray for God's direct intervention in their lives.<sup>106</sup>

About two years after Franklin's article on the providence of God, a new preacher by the name of Hemphill arrived in Philadelphia, and Franklin wrote in his autobiography that "I became one of his constant hearers."<sup>107</sup> It was shortly after Mr. Hemphill's arrival that Franklin published an article entitled "Self-Denial is not the Essence of Virtue." In that article, we find Franklin denying a doctrine that had been fundamental to his beliefs up to this time. He denied his previous claim that men would be rewarded by God according to their virtues. In this February 18, 1735, article, he wrote that "We do not pretend to merit any thing of God, for he is above our Services; and the Benefits he confers on us, are the Effects of his Goodness and Bounty."<sup>108</sup>

Less than two months later, the *Gazette*



published an article that many attribute to Franklin entitled "Dialogue between Two Presbyterians." If, as is frequently assumed, the character in this dialogue represented by the initial S. conveys Franklin's own opinions, then this dialogue shows that at this point in 1735, Franklin was still struggling with the proper relationship between virtue and belief in regards to salvation. In the dialogue, S. claims that "Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that End." S. also said, "The whole, says he, need not a Physician, but they that are sick; and, I come not to call the Righteous, but Sinners, to Repentance: Does not this imply, that there were good Men, who, without Faith in him, were in a State of Salvation?"<sup>109</sup> We will see in a moment that Franklin quickly resolved this error, but it is important to note that if Franklin actually did use S. to convey his own opinions, then this dialogue marks the first time that Franklin chose to support his theological writings with quotes from Scripture. Nor is this statement the only reference to the Bible in the dialogue. Throughout the course of the discussion, S. directly quoted no less than ten passages of Scripture in support of his position. This is a significant change from Franklin's earlier statement that "Revelation had indeed no weight with me."

There is another even more significant change which should be noted at this point. In the dialogue, S. made the statement, "I suppose you think no Doctrine fit to be preached in a Christian Congregation, but such as Christ and his Apostles used to preach," and a few paragraphs later, he said, "Our Saviour was a Teacher of Morality or Virtue, and they that were deficient and desired to be taught, ought first to believe in him as an able and faithful Teacher." If these are the opinions of Franklin himself, then this dialogue marks the first recorded instance that I know of in which he referred to Jesus as the Savior and as the Christ.

In addition to publishing the "Dialogue between Two Presbyterians," Franklin also published three pamphlets in defense of Hemphill. In those pamphlets, we find Franklin shedding the last vestiges of his previously held deism and fully adopting biblical Christianity. The third of these pamphlets was entitled "A Defense of Mr. Hemphill's Observations," and in it, Franklin declared in no uncertain terms that "Christ by his Death and Sufferings has purchas'd for us those easy Terms and Conditions of our Acceptance with God, propos'd in the Gospel, to wit, Faith and Repentance."<sup>110</sup> Here at last, he had arrived at pure Christian doctrine. He finally understood

that there is a God, that sin separates men from Him, that no man is virtuous enough to regain fellowship with God, that the penalty for this failure is death, that Christ paid that penalty for all men through His own death on the cross and that it is only by placing faith in His sacrifice and repenting of our own failures that we can be brought back into favor with God. Here, Franklin speaks not as a mere deist or theist but as a true follower of Jesus Christ.

Now, some may claim that these pamphlets in defense of Hemphill were not intended to convey Franklin's personal beliefs. Ironically, however, many of those same individuals have used misconstrued quotes from these very same pamphlets in support of their claims that Franklin rejected Christianity. Gregg Frazer, for example, wrote the following in his book on the founding fathers:

*In his defense of Hemphill, Franklin attacked the orthodox image of God as a righteous judge who must be satisfied as, in the words of one scholar, "repugnant both to reason and to God." One would expect him to oppose the doctrine that followed from that presupposition -- that is, that Christ came to offer an acceptable sacrifice. Indeed, Franklin tried to defend Hemphill against the charge that he*

*denied "the true and proper satisfaction of Christ" by diminishing its significance and by changing the subject.*<sup>III</sup>

Frazer's conclusion is clearly contradicted by the above quote from Franklin's pamphlet, but his statement indicates that both sides of the argument accept Franklin's pamphlets in defense of Hemphill as expressions of Franklin's own opinions.

As additional evidence of this conclusion, we could note that Franklin's writings on religion subsequent to his defense of Hemphill were significantly different from his writings before that time. For example, three years after Hemphill's trial, Franklin wrote a letter to his parents in which he briefly mentioned his new religious beliefs. Here is what he said:

*My Mother grieves that one of her Sons is an Arian, another an Arminian. What an Arminian or an Arian is, I cannot say that I very well know; the Truth is, I make such Distinctions very little my Study; I think vital Religion has always suffer'd, when Orthodoxy is more regarded than Virtue. And the Scripture assures me, that at the last Day, we shall not be examin'd what we thought, but what we did; and our Recommendation will not be that we*

*said Lord, Lord, but that we did Good to our Fellow Creatures. See Matth. 26.*

Frazer said of this letter that Franklin here "confessed that his mother 'grieves' over his denial of the Trinity," but this conclusion ignores what we have previously learned about Franklin's beliefs. This letter notes that only one of Mrs. Franklin's sons was an Arian (a group that followed the teachings of Arius who denied the deity of Christ), but the other was an Arminian. Frazer completely ignores this distinction and merely assumes that Benjamin Franklin must be the Arian son. This is a remarkable oversight, for just ten pages earlier in his book, Frazer went to great lengths to prove that Benjamin Franklin was not a Calvinist. And indeed he was not, for we have already seen that he wrote of the free will of man in his 1732 article on the providence of God. Thus, Benjamin Franklin was most likely the son which Mrs. Franklin thought to be an Arminian, and it was his brother who denied the existence of the Trinity. Aside from this, however, the thing to note about this letter is that Franklin responded to his mother's concerns by quoting Scripture. This was never his practice prior to his defense of Hemphill, and it serves to prove that his conversion to Christianity was genuine.

Of course, it could be argued that this letter marks a regression from the bold statement of faith in the Hemphill pamphlets because Franklin here writes that we will be judged based on our actions, but such an objection would be very much mistaken. In fact, that is the very same conclusion that Franklin's sister presented to him in a letter in 1743. Franklin's response to his sister's apprehensions should be sufficient to remove any doubt of his conversion. Here is what he wrote:

*You express yourself as if you thought I was against Worshipping of God, and believed Good Works would merit Heaven; which are both Fancies of your own, I think, without Foundation. I am so far from thinking that God is not to be worshipped, that I have compos'd and wrote a whole Book of Devotions for my own Use: And I imagine there are few, if any, in the World, so weak as to imagine, that the little Good we can do here, can merit so vast a Reward hereafter. There are some Things in your New England Doctrines and Worship, which I do not agree with, but I do not therefore condemn them, or desire to shake your Belief or Practice of them. We may dislike things that are nevertheless right in themselves. I would only have you make me the same Allowances, and have a better Opinion both of Morality and*

*your Brother. Read the Pages of Mr. Edward's late Book entitled Some Thoughts concerning the present Revival of Religion in NE. from 367 to 375; and when you judge of others, if you can perceive the Fruit to be good, don't terrify your self that the Tree may be evil, but be assur'd it is not so; for you know who has said, Men do not gather Grapes of Thorns or Figs of Thistles.*

Here, Franklin provides a direct denial of the claim that he was relying on good works to gain entrance into Heaven, and to further allay the fears of his sister, he directs her to discover his beliefs about morality in the pages of Jonathan Edwards' account of the revival in New England. Within the pages that Franklin listed, is found a remarkable explanation of the proper role of morality in the life of the believer.

This section of Edwards' book begins with:

*But another thing I would mention, which it is of much greater importance that we should attend to, and that is the duty incumbent upon God's people at this day, to take heed, that while they abound in external duties of devotion, such as praying, hearing, singing, and attending religious meetings, there be a proportionable care to abound in moral duties,*

*such as acts of righteousness, truth, meekness, forgiveness, and love towards our neighbour; which are of much greater importance in the sight of God than all the externals of his worship...*

*The internal acts and principles of the worship of God, or the worship of the heart, in love and fear, trust in God, and resignation to him, &c. are the most essential and important of all duties of religion whatsoever; for therein consists the essence of all religion. But of this inward religion there are two sorts of external manifestations or expressions. To one sort belong outward acts of worship, such as meeting in religious assemblies, attending sacraments and other outward institutions, honouring God with gestures, such as bowing, or kneeling before him, or with words, in speaking honourably of him in prayer, praise, or religious conference. To the other sort belong expressions of our love to God, by obeying his moral commands, self-denial, righteousness, meekness, and christian love, in our behaviour among men. The latter are of vastly the greatest importance in the christian life.*

After making this distinction between two types of "outward acts of worship," Edwards



continued by explaining that:

*When the Scripture directs us to show our faith by our works, it is principally the latter sort are intended; as appears by Jam. ii from ver. 8, to the end, and 2d chap. ver. 3, 7-11. And we are to be judged, at the last day, especially by these latter sort of works; as is evident by the account we have of the day of judgment, in the 25th of Matt.. External acts of worship, in words and gestures, and outward forms, are of little use, but as signs of something else, or as they are a profession of inward worship. They are not so properly showing our religion by our deeds; for they are only showing our religion by words, or an outward profession. But he that shows religion in the other sort of duties, shows it in something more than a profession of words, he shows it in deeds. And though deeds may be hypocritical, as well as words; yet in themselves they are of greater importance, for they are much more profitable to ourselves and our neighbour. We cannot express our love to God by doing any thing that is profitable to him; God would therefore have us do it in those things that are profitable to our neighbours, whom he has constituted his receivers. Our goodness extends not to God, but to our fellow-Christians. The latter sort of duties put greater honour upon God, because there is greater self-*

*denial in them. The external acts of worship, consisting in bodily gestures, words, and sounds, are the cheapest part of religion, and least contrary to our lusts. The difficulty of thorough, external religion, does not lie in them. Let wicked men enjoy their covetousness, their pride, their malice, envy, and revenge, their sensuality and voluptuousness, in their behaviour amongst men, and they will be willing to compound the matter with God, and submit to what forms of worship you please, and as many as you please. This was manifest in the Jews in the days of the prophets, the Pharisees in Christ's time, and the Papists and Mahometans at this day.*

Even today, Edwards is well known as one of the greatest theologians in the history of America, and the deference to his teachings on morality indicates that Franklin had an appropriately Christian view of that subject. This is even further supported by a letter which Franklin wrote to George Whitefield in 1753 in which he said:

*You will see in this my notion of good works, that I am far from expecting to merit heaven by them. By heaven we understand a state of happiness, infinite in degree, and eternal in duration: I can do nothing to deserve such*

*rewards. He that for giving a draught of water to a thirsty person, should expect to be paid with a good plantation, would be modest in his demands, compared with those who think they deserve heaven for the little good they do on earth. Even the mixt imperfect pleasures we enjoy in this world, are rather from God's goodness than our merit: how much more such happiness of heaven!*

All of this is consistent with the view that Franklin rejected deism and had fully committed himself to Christianity by the time of his defense of Hemphill in 1735. From that point on, there is a decided change in his religious statements. In place of the feeble reasonings of a young deist, we find a solid faith in the work of Christ and a firm reliance on the teachings of the Scriptures. In fact, Franklin was so convinced of the truth of the Bible that he argued in the Constitutional Convention that "We should remember the character which the Scripture requires in rulers." The evidence for Franklin's conversion is far too solid and secure to be shaken by the single admission of a particular doubt in his old age.

# What is a Christian?

What is it that makes an individual a Christian? This simple question has been asked and answered alternatively for nearly two millennia, and, in recent years, it has been brought once again to the forefront of academic thought by a book on the founders of America by historian Gregg Frazer who postulated a list of ten beliefs which an individual must accept in order to be of the Christian faith. How one answers this question will have profound implications in his life, his ministry and his future estate. It is imperative that every individual come to a realization of the minimal beliefs with which he must agree in order to obtain salvation.

To truly understand the faith by which an individual becomes a Christian, it is necessary to consider Christianity not as a movement within Western culture but rather as a specific religion in history. In an article for the Harvard Theological Journal, B. B. Warfield once wrote that: "Clearly, Christianity being a historical religion, its content can be determined only on historical grounds." Warfield then cited H. H. Went as coming to the same conclusion when he wrote that the Christian religion "is a historically given religion" and that we must determine its essence "by such an objective historical

examination as we should give it were we dealing with the determination of the essence of some other historical religion.”<sup>112</sup>

To obtain an accurate definition of Christianity, therefore, it is necessary to consider the original usage of that term as recorded in the Book of Acts. In that portion of Scripture, we read that “the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch,”<sup>113</sup> and from this we can see that the name of Christian was given to those who were in another place called “the disciples of the Lord.”<sup>114</sup> This, however, is not to be understood as a reference to the original twelve disciples only, for none of the original twelve were in Antioch at this time, and further, it is stated earlier in the Scriptures that the number of disciples on the morning of Pentecost was “about an hundred and twenty.”<sup>115</sup> The proper understanding of which individuals were called Christians in Antioch can be seen in the phrase which precedes that statement. Just before we are told that the disciples were called Christians, we are informed that Paul and Barnabas traveled to that city and “assembled themselves with the church.” It was thus the members of the church that are here said to have been previously known as disciples and which were, from then on, known among the heathen as Christians.

Consideration must now be given to the means by which these disciples became members of the church. This is also explained in the Book of Acts where we read that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”<sup>116</sup> The means of this salvation by which individuals are made Christians and added to the church is stated in another place to be “the gospel of Christ”<sup>117</sup> which is clearly defined in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.<sup>118</sup>

This gospel, or good news, is the means by which an individual is able to become a

Christian, but he must first believe it to be true as is stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.<sup>119</sup>

It is for this reason that we read in the Epistle to the Romans that this gospel is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth”<sup>120</sup> and not simply to everyone regardless of his belief. Of those who refuse to believe this gospel, the Scriptures tell us that the Lord will come “in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>121</sup> But all of those who believe are promised salvation by which they are made members of the church, disciples of Christ and Christians in the purest meaning of the word.

This brief survey of the New Testament teaching on salvation settles the historical foundation of Christianity upon the belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but that is not how the religion of Christ has always been viewed. In the early part of the fourth century, Emperor Constantine assembled at Nicea the

first ecumenical council of the Catholic Church in order to address the heresy of Arianism. Athanasius wrote of this council that:

heretics have assembled together with the Emperor Constantius, so that he, by alleging the authority of the bishops, may exercise his power against whomsoever he will, and while he persecutes may yet avoid the name of persecutor.<sup>122</sup>

Of course, the council decided against the Arians, but Athanasius' fear of sanctioning persecution was fully realized, for in the decision of the Council of Nicea is found the first departure from the historical definition of Christianity and, consequently, the first official denial of the title of "Christian" on grounds other than the gospel.

The decisions of the Council of Nicea were set forth to the public in the form of a creed, which has come to be known as the Nicene Creed, a list of twenty canons and a synodal letter which was published throughout the churches. Both the Nicene Creed and the synodal letter pronounce a condemnation of anathema against individuals who reject a particular belief in regards to the Trinity. Here is the text of the creed in which



this anathema was first pronounced:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten (γεννηθέντα), not made, being of one substance (ὁμοούσιον, consubstantialem) with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν), or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or

subject to change or conversion —  
all that so say, the Catholic and  
Apostolic Church anathematizes  
them.<sup>123</sup>

According to this creed, anyone who suggests that Colossians 1:15 and Revelation 3:14 could be viewed as saying that Christ was created by God; and then, as God and with God, He created everything else – anyone who makes this suggestion is anathematized. Or if anyone were to claim that Christ could have chosen to sin when He “was in all points tempted like as we are,”<sup>124</sup> that person would likewise be anathematized.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that to anathematize someone is to “separate him from the society of all Christians” and to “judge him condemned to eternal fire with Satan and his angels and all the reprobate.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, to anathematize someone is to declare that individual to not be a Christian. This judgment is not to be taken lightly, and the Bible provides only two justifications for its pronouncement. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul said that anyone who preaches a gospel other than the gospel which he and the other apostles preached,

then that preacher is to be anathematized;<sup>126</sup> and in his first letter to the church at Corinth, he proclaimed the same judgment against anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>127</sup> There is no other justification given in Scripture for declaring that someone is not a Christian. This judgment is to be reserved for those who do not love the Lord and those who preach a means of salvation other than faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

The Council of Nicea abandoned the example of Scripture. They chose to reject certain individuals from being Christians simply because those individuals did not hold to the exact same view of the Trinity as the majority of the bishops of the Catholic church. This act of straying from the authority of the Scriptures placed the Catholic church on a slippery slope producing anathema upon anathema until anyone who dared to disagree with the Catholics on practically any point of doctrine was condemned by them to an eternity in hell.

In fact, less than sixty years after the Council of Nicea, the Catholic church formed another council at Constantinople where it was declared that "Every heresy is to be anathematized." The title of heretic was defined by this council as:

those who have been previously banned from the church and also those later anathematised by ourselves: and in addition those who claim to confess a faith that is sound, but who have seceded and hold assemblies in rivalry with the bishops who are in communion with us.

128

One of the sects anathematized by the Council of Constantinople as heretics was identified in the eighth canon of the Council of Nicea as the Cathari. John T. Christian identified the Cathari as being the followers of Novatian. He wrote of them that:

On account of the purity of their lives they were called the Cathari, that is, the pure. “What is still more,” says Mosheim, “they rebaptized such as came over to them from the Catholics” (Mosheim, Institutes of Ecclesiastical History I. p. 203. New York, 1871). Since they baptized those who came to them from other communions they were called Anabaptists. The fourth Lateran Council decreed that these

rebaptizers should be punished by death. Accordingly, Albanus, a zealous minister, and others, were punished with death. They were, says Robinson, “trinitarian Baptists.” They held to the independence of the churches; and recognized the equality of all pastors in respect to dignity and authority.<sup>129</sup>

These “trinitarian Baptists” were condemned to hell by the Council of Constantinople for no other crime than that of seceding from the Catholic church. This is a far departure from the biblical example of anathematizing only those who do not love the Lord and those who preach another gospel, and one would think that it would be difficult to stray any further from the clear teaching of the Scriptures. The Council of Ephesus, however, caused the Catholic church to slip even further away from the truth.

A mere fifty years after the Council of Constantinople, the Catholic church assembled another council at Ephesus to discuss the hypostatic union of Christ. In the sixth session of this council, it was declared that the Nicene Creed was to be the only creed of the church. It was also said that:

Any who dare to compose or bring forth or produce another creed for the benefit of those who wish to turn from Hellenism or Judaism or some other heresy to the knowledge of the truth, if they are bishops or clerics they should be deprived of their respective charges and if they are laymen they are to be anathematised.<sup>130</sup>

The interesting aspect of this particular anathema is that it is a direct reversal of the proclamation found in Scripture. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was very direct in saying that those who were preaching a false gospel were to be anathematized, but the believers who had accepted this false gospel were still referred to by Paul as brethren. The Council of Ephesus reversed this process. They proclaimed the laymen who believed heresies to be anathema, but the bishops who taught those heresies to the people were merely removed from office, and the Catholic church moved even farther from historical and biblical definition of Christianity.

The Council of Ephesus was very quickly followed by the Council of Chalcedon which adopted the same formula of anathematizing

laymen while only disrobing clergy for an identical offense. In the canons of the Council of Chalcedon, the punishment of anathema was applied to four different offenses. The first of these was mentioned in the second canon:

IF any Bishop should ordain for money, and put to sale a grace which cannot be sold, and for money ordain a bishop, or chorepiscopus, or presbyters, or deacons, or any other of those who are counted among the clergy; or if through lust of gain he should nominate for money a steward, or advocate, or prosmonarius, or any one whatever who is on the roll of the Church, let him who is convicted of this forfeit his own rank; and let him who is ordained be nothing profited by the purchased ordination or promotion; but let him be removed from the dignity or charge he has obtained for money. And if any one should be found negotiating such shameful and unlawful transactions, let him also, if he is a clergyman, be deposed from his rank, and if he is a layman or monk, let him be anathematized.

In this canon, a layman or a monk was to be anathematized if he even appeared to assist a bishop in procuring money in exchange for appointments within the church. There was to be no trial, no provision for determining whether the accused was actually guilty or not. The mere presence of suspicion was enough for him to be condemned to eternity in hell.

The seventh canon applied to members of the clergy who chose to leave the service of the church and take up service in the military or in some other capacity under a secular ruler.

WE have decreed that those who have once been enrolled among the clergy, or have been made monks, shall accept neither a military charge nor any secular dignity; and if they shall presume to do so and not repent in such wise as to turn again to that which they had first chosen for the love of God, they shall be anathematized.<sup>132</sup>

The fifteenth canon concerned women who were given in marriage after being ordained as deacons.



A WOMAN shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her.<sup>133</sup>

And the twenty-seventh canon pronounced anathema against any layman who chose to elope instead of receiving a proper marriage:

THE holy Synod has decreed that those who forcibly carry off women under pretence of marriage, and the alders or abettors of such ravishers, shall be degraded if clergymen, and if laymen be anathematized.<sup>134</sup>

The Second Council of Constantinople extended the list of anathemas by twenty-nine anathemas from the council and nine anathemas from the Emperor. These included anathemas against anyone who did not anathematize heretics, who did not anathematize those who defended Theodore, who did not anathematize those who

wrote against the writings of Cyril, or who claimed that any part of the letter from Ibas to Maris was correct.

These pronunciations were made in the last four capitulas of this council. The eleventh capitula states:

If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, as well as their impious writings, as also all other heretics already condemned and anathematized by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and by the aforesaid four Holy Synods and [if anyone does not equally anathematize] all those who have held and hold or who in their impiety persist in holding to the end the same opinion as those heretics just mentioned: let him be anathema.

135

This is followed by the twelfth capitula:

If anyone defends the impious Theodore of Mopsuestia ... if anyone

does not anathematize him or his impious writings, as well as all those who protect or defend him, or who assert that his exegesis is orthodox, or who write in favour of him and of his impious works, or those who share the same opinions, or those who have shared them and still continue unto the end in this heresy: let him be anathema.<sup>136</sup>

Then the thirteenth capitula concludes:

...if anyone does not anathematize these impious writings and those who have held or who hold these sentiments, and all those who have written contrary to the true faith or against St. Cyril and his XII. Chapters, and who die in their impiety: let him be anathema.<sup>137</sup>

And the final capitula states:

If anyone shall defend that letter which Ibas is said to have written to Maris the Persian ... If anyone

therefore shall defend the  
aforementioned epistle and shall not  
anathematize it and those who  
defend it and say that it is right or  
that a part of it is right, or if anyone  
shall defend those who have written  
or shall write in its favour, or in  
defence of the impieties which are  
contained in it, as well as those who  
shall presume to defend it or the  
impieties which it contains in the  
name of the Holy Fathers or of the  
Holy Synod of Chalcedon, and shall  
remain in these offenses unto the  
end: let him be anathema. <sup>138</sup>

In these four capitulas, the Catholic church progressed so far from the teaching of Scripture that they condemned to hell not only those who dared to disagree with Catholic doctrine but also anyone who did not agree with the decision to condemn “heretics” to hell or even those who did not agree with condemning to hell those who did not condemn “heretics” to hell. According to the standard put forth by this council, the Apostle Paul himself should be anathematized for his failure to anathematize the Galatian believers who had been deceived by a false gospel.

The Third Council of Constantinople was mostly just a direct application of the decisions of the previous council to a particular list of men culminating in the exclamation, “To all heretics, anathema! To all who side with heretics, anathema!”<sup>139</sup>

Then, the seventh of the great ecumenical councils of the Catholic church, the Second Council of Nicea, embraced the ultimate departure from the biblical view of anathemas by anathematizing all those who did not accept the false gospel of Mariology. This council pronounced that:

If anyone shall not confess the holy ever-virgin Mary, truly and properly the Mother of God, to be higher than every creature whether visible or invisible, and does not with sincere faith seek her intercessions as of one having confidence in her access to our God, since she bare him ... let him be anathema from the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, and from the seven holy Ecumenical Synods!<sup>140</sup>

Thus, over a period of less than four hundred

years, the simple gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ was perverted by the Catholic church to a gospel of strict adherence to Catholic dogma and to the veneration of Mary, but the true message of the gospel was not lost. It was preserved throughout this time in the patient teachings of the churches of those called the Anabaptists. These churches included the Cathari, the Donatists, the Albigenses, the Waldensians and many others. According to John T. Christian:

The footsteps of the Baptists of the ages can more easily be traced by blood than by baptism. It is a lineage of suffering rather than a succession of bishops; a martyrdom of principle, rather than a dogmatic decree of councils; a golden chord of love, rather than an iron chain of succession, which, while attempting to rattle its links back to the apostles, has been of more service in chaining some protesting Baptist to the stake than in proclaiming the truth of the New Testament. It is, nevertheless, a right royal succession, that in every age the Baptists have been advocates of

liberty for all, and have held that the  
gospel of the Son of God makes  
every man a free man in Christ  
Jesus.<sup>141</sup>

The true doctrine of salvation by faith in the finished work of Christ was preserved by these Baptists in the face of great persecution until it was made the rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. B. B. Warfield noted that “In the mind of Jesus as truly in the mind of His followers, the religion which He founded was by way of eminence the religion of redemption,”<sup>142</sup> and it was a return to the true gospel of redemption which marked the success of the Reformation.

In the formation of the ideology which produced the freedoms of America, there is a marked progression from the declaration of Robert Persons that a man can be a Christian only if “he believe unfainedly the total sum of documents and mysteries, left by Jesus and his disciples in the Catholic Church”<sup>143</sup> to the recognition of the true gospel by the great puritan preachers such as Thomas Watson who taught that:

If you would enter into the bond of  
the covenant, get faith in the blood of

the covenant. Christ's blood is the blood of atonement; believe in this blood, and you are safely arked in God's mercy.<sup>144</sup>

This theme was picked up by the patriot preachers of the revolution who echoed the words of John Witherspoon that:

through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. There is a fulness of merit in his obedience and death to procure your pardon. There is no sin of so deep a dye, or so infectious a stain, but his blood is sufficient to wash it out. This is no new doctrine, or modern discovery, to gratify a curious mind. Perhaps you have heard such things so often, that you nauseate and disdain the repetition. But they are the words of eternal life, on which your souls salvation depends; and therefore, though this call should come but once more to be rejected, it is yet again within your offer.<sup>145</sup>

The pure gospel message was carried throughout the nineteenth century by theologians such as



Albert Barnes who proclaimed, "To all, I say, if you believe the gospel, heaven is yours."<sup>146</sup> And in the twentieth century, this message was defended in the writings of men like Lewis Sperry Chafer, J. Dwight Pentecost, Josh McDowell and numerous others. Chafer wrote of the gospel that "The believer, in contrast to the unsaved, has consented to the atonement as the basis of his salvation, and has thus appropriated by faith the propitiation made for him."<sup>147</sup> Pentecost claimed that "The Word of God tells us that a man who does no more than believe that Jesus Christ is his personal Saviour passes from death into life."<sup>148</sup> And McDowell emphatically stated that "Christian conversion is based upon something objective, the resurrection of Christ."<sup>149</sup>

The history of America, more than that of any other nation, has exemplified the conclusion of Paul Feine that:

The Christian Church is an inevitable product of the declaration of the expiatory effect of His death for many. For those who have experienced redemption and reconciliation through the death of Jesus must by virtue of this gift of

grace draw together and distinguish themselves over against other communities.<sup>150</sup>

What is it that makes an individual a Christian? What belief must one hold to in order to be delivered from the curse of sin? The answer is not to be found in the adherence to a set of accepted doctrines, nor is it discovered in the creeds of the ancient church. The key which admits the believer into the community of Christ is his acceptance of the true gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.

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