

The 1 Reason the U.S. Constitution Has Survived

The greatest contribution that the Founders made to the well-being of America was the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It is appropriate that we talk about this document in a week when the Constitution is lauded. How is it that this document has endured with only a few amendments? The first 10 are usually viewed as part of the original document and two more—the 18th and the 21st—negated each other (prohibition and repeal). Another handful were easily justified: ending of slavery (13th Amendment); eliminating voting restriction based on race or sex (15th and 19th Amendments); limiting the tenure of the president to two terms (22nd Amendment); and providing for presidential succession (25th Amendment). Why has the basic structure of the document stayed intact?

The answer to that question is that the Constitution was founded upon what can only be described as a Christian/biblical worldview. One can fairly ask: How can that be? There is no mention of Christianity in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, except for the mention of religion in the First Amendment, and some of the Founders can hardly be described as traditional Christians.

The 55 men who were delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 were, with few exceptions, Christians. They can correctly be called, the Founders. M.E. Bradford in "A Worthy Company" summarizes their religious views. He writes, "With no more than five exceptions (and perhaps no more than three) they [the 55 delegates] were orthodox members of established Christian communions: Approximately 29 were Anglicans, 16 to 18 Calvinists [Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed], two Methodists, two Lutherans, two Roman Catholics, one lapsed Quaker and sometimes Anglican, and one open Deist—Dr. Ben Franklin."

But how can it be shown that the Constitution was shaped by biblical presuppositions? The single most important foundational doctrine in forming a civil government is what is called the "doctrine of man," or the "doctrine of human nature." Most of the Founders held to a biblical view that man is depraved, sinful and frail but, through Christ, capable of regeneration. That conventional Christian view of man was predominate among the Founders. Both James Madison and Alexander Hamilton used the term "depravity" to refer to man's capability to do evil with political power (The Federalist, #37 and #78). Even Jefferson, the least orthodox of the Founders (who incidentally was not a delegate to the Constitutional Convention), said in the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798: "In questions of power, let no more be heard of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution." How was the Constitution shaped by that view of man?

Madison, in Federalist #51, which may be the most important commentary in American political history wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." So here is the beginning of the Founders' view of the need for a civil government. We are sinful and frail and will do wrong—theft, murder and the like. Civil government is a necessity. He continued, "If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." The depravity which leads to the need for government presents a perplexing problem: Those who govern must of necessity be the very persons we just said were sinful and frail and therefore likely to misrule or tyrannize. Madison again writes, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to control the governed and in the next place oblige it to control itself. The dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

These auxiliary precautions are the structures and devices of the Constitution that are built-in barriers to misrule such as separation of powers, dispersal of power among various levels of government, checks and balances, and enumerating of powers. These are devices intended to make the exercise of power by rulers, benignly awkward and safely difficult. Why? The Founders knew the true nature of humankind that is identified in the Bible and part of a Christian worldview. Consequently, they designed a civil government that protected life, liberty and property for America's citizens—an enduring edifice to freedom.

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