

The Christian Influence Behind the Declaration of Independence

Today we celebrate the founding of our nation, which started with our Declaration of Independence from England. Because of this, I thought it necessary to publish one of my seminars on this topic.

The Declaration of Independence, which is the foundation of our nation's Constitution, is so imbued with a biblical worldview that it would be controversial to read it aloud in many public schools, as well as other venues, because of the current secular movement toward removing Christianity from the public square.

My prayer is that leaders will use this teaching to remind their congregations, as well as friends and families, as to the Christian influence of our nation's founding.

American historian George Bancroft believed that Christian theologian John Calvin had a profound influence on the origin of American independence.

Introductory Points

Nineteenth-century Spanish statesman Emilio Castelar traced America's source to one book: the Bible. In 1892, the Supreme Court unanimously concluded without qualification that "this is a Christian nation."

Yet on November 17, 1992, 100 years later, Gov. Kirk Fordice ran into much opposition when he voiced the same opinion. The popular assumption today is that the U.S. is a pluralist nation inspired by the best human reason from 18th-century Enlightenment—not by the political ideas anchored in the

Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

Views against the Christian influence include:

- America's founders were deists.
- The Revolution was unscriptural because of Romans 13:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-14.

The Law of God

The term "laws of nature" was equivalent to the well-known common law term the "law of nature," which was the will of God revealed in nature and was composed of all the "immutable laws of human nature ... the eternal, immutable laws of good and evil, to which the Creator himself in all his dispensations, conforms" (Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*).

Second, the term "laws of nature" was not equivalent to "natural law." The former was established and stated by God; the latter was derived from Scripture and stated by men.

Third, the "laws of nature," being the exact expression of God's will for all of creation, were binding over the entire globe, in all countries and at all times. No human laws are of any validity if contrary to this (Blackstone, *Commentaries*).

Fourth, the phrase "laws of nature and of nature's God" was equivalent to Blackstone's phrase "the law of nature and the law of God." The two terms were placed in tandem by Blackstone and the Declaration because they were equivalents coming from the same source—God—but in different ways and at different times.

Fifth, both categories of God's law came out of the churches' reading of Romans 1 and 2.

"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."
—Declaration of Independence

The Bible declares God to be the Creator (Is. 40:28; 1 Pet. 4:19; Gen. 1:1, 27).

As Creator, God is the one who gave mankind all of the unalienable rights listed in the Declaration—see also Genesis 2:7.

God is the giver of liberty (2 Cor. 3:17).

Finally, God has given to mankind the “pursuit of happiness” (Eccl. 3:13; James 1:17).

The Declarations’ authors used biblical terms to describe man’s origin because they believed the book of Genesis to be historically true. Moreover, it was the creation account of the book of Genesis that undergirded the “laws of nature and of Nature’s God”—the very foundation of the Declaration’s claim of right.

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”
—Declaration of Independence

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the

Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions ... ” –Declaration of Independence (This was taken from Judges 11:27.)

John Locke referred to a biblical account (Judg. 11) to support the proposition that only God could judge man when in the state of war. An appeal to God as judge could not have been made had America’s founders subscribed to deism.

“With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives...” –Declaration of Independence

“Divine Providence” was one of the oldest cornerstones of Christian teaching—it represented the heart of their belief in God, namely, that God was the ever-active, moment-by-moment governor of the universe.

God is Jehovah Jireh, meaning “the Lord shall provide” (Gen. 22:14).

The Four Principles That Anchor the Declaration of Independence

1. Rights come from God.
2. The purpose of civil government is to secure those rights.
3. The power of civil government is given by the consent of the governed, each of whom is fully entitled to rule.
4. The right to govern is forfeited by a tyrant to lower civil magistrates in order to restore the rule of law.

All four of these principles are Christian.

Jefferson’s early draft of the Declaration had the word *derived*. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams replaced that with the phrase *endowed by their creator*. By replacing *derived* with *endowed by their Creator*, the Declaration rested upon rights

as God had given them, not as man understood them to be. Thus, America's founders chose to establish the new nation upon the laws of nature and of nature's God, not upon natural law.

Later, Congress inserted the adjective *certain* in the place of Jefferson's *inherent*. The word *inherent* means "existing in something else, so as to be inseparable from it." The word was appropriate if man was certain about the existence of the rights being relied upon but uncertain of their exact content. Once God was identified as the giver of those rights, however, then the word *certain* became appropriate, because whatever God had given to mankind was "sure, true, undoubted, unquestionable, existing in fact and truth" (the definition of *certain*).

When the words *endowed* and *certain* are coupled with *unalienable*, then the Declaration makes a most remarkable claim: What God has given for the benefit of all mankind cannot be given away by the recipient or taken away by the donor (Numb. 23:19; 2 Chron. 19:7).

"That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." –Declaration of Independence

It is most instructive that the Declaration's authors did not make the same claim about governments as they had about unalienable rights. God endowed mankind with rights, but governments are "instituted" among men. The Bible is the source of this distinction: Biblically, a king was under the law of God, not above it. (See Deuteronomy 17:14-19, Exodus 18, 1 Samuel 8, and Romans 13:1, 4.)

Biblically, a change of leadership was not fully implemented until ratified by the people (1 Sam. 10:17, 24).

Samuel Rutherford wrote in *Lex Rex* that no king could claim to rule by divine right, unaccountable to the people. That's what the Declaration meant when it said "all men are created

equal." God had not created any class of people or family of men who were entitled to rule over other men. That's why the Declaration had the phrase "the consent of the governed." As Locke taught, civil rulers generally derive their authority from a compact or covenant with the people.

Civil Rule: The Right of the People to Resist

Did the colonists have the right to resist civil government? The divine right of kings was resisted in Christian writings all the way back to the 11th century.

Interposition means "the resistance to tyranny through lower magistrates." This theory was put into practice in the 13th century, when the barons and bishops combined forces to resist King John, giving birth to the Magna Carta, which gave the king of England a choice of affirming known rights by means of a written compact and ending oppression of the church by the state or facing armed resistance, which they themselves would lead.

However, it took the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century to develop more fully the biblical support for the idea that Christians could resist lawless civil rulers to the point of overthrowing them by force or arms if necessary.

Calvin said in his Institutes that Romans 13 denied to the individual Christian the right to take up the sword against a lawless civil ruler but that it did not prohibit a "lower civil magistrate of the people."

Calvin's development of the doctrine of resistance to wicked authorities, in terms of the theory of interposition by lesser magistrates, was further developed and spread by his own Calvinist followers—this was to be one of his most powerful legacies for the history of liberty in the modern Western world.

In 1579, the Huguenots were the first to apply Calvin's

exegetical defense to a real-life situation as they challenged the claim of absolute rule by the royalists of France. They issued the famous “*Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*” (A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants).

These principles were picked up and used by John Knox in Scotland and then later by Rutherford in his book *Lex Rex* in 1644.

Forty years later, these ideas bore fruit in England as a group of Tories and Whigs asked William of Orange for help in restoring English liberties from the absolutism of James II (1685-1689).

John Adams attested that the *Vindiciae* was one of the most important volumes circulating in pre-revolutionary America. Add to this the influence of John Locke and his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* in 1690, and the evidence is overwhelming that the Declaration’s justification for the War for Independence was the Christian doctrine of interposition by lesser magistrates.

Truths: God-Created, Not Man-Invented

“We hold these truths to be self-evident ...” –Declaration of Independence

The founders believed in absolute truths, not moral relativism.

For something to be self-evident, a truth must first be evident. The only truths that can meet this criterion of evident were those pronounced by God to be so.

In Romans 1:20, *self-evident* is used as an adjective to modify a specific truth, affirming that such truth is true—not because it has been proved to man’s satisfaction, but because what may be known of God is manifest to them (Rom 1:18, 19).

Moreover, because the Declaration was written not just to men

who had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, it had to recite “self-evident” truths in order to appeal even to men without the Bible who knew in their hearts that such truths are true, because God had placed these truths in them (Rom. 2:14, 15).

Conclusion

Americans today face great danger because they refuse to submit to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” that governed the nation’s founders. Unless America is restored to its Christian heritage, the lawlessness that plagues this great land will continue to increase, and the Declaration’s legacy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be lost. We will be left with man’s arbitrary opinion and rule of law, which was the basis for the bloodiest century in human history with the revolutions of the Bolshevik’s in Russia and the communists in China, Cuba and Korea.

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