

## **Thoughts on America's Founding and the Church's Relationship to the Government**

*Scott Christensen – Revised 2-15-2023*

Many Christians and other conservatives claim that America was founded as a Christian nation. Others are now calling for a form of Christian Nationalism even though there is not a clear notion of what this means. These are slippery notions and believers must be careful in how they address the matter. America was in substantial part founded upon a set of ethical principles and loosely construed political ideas that derive from a Christian and Biblical worldview even though other worldviews informed its founding (i.e., the ideas of the Enlightenment, deism, British political thought, etc.). This is different than saying America was founded as a specifically Christian nation. Some context is necessary here.

During the Colonial period in America, 17<sup>th</sup> century England had in fact been established as a sort of Christian nation if you can call it that. Specifically, the Church of England (i.e., Anglicanism) was established as the official religion of England in which the King or Queen of England was the head of the Church (not unlike the Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church). This meant that the Church and the State were inextricably tied together. The State established specific doctrines and religious practices of the Church that became the law of the land. Failure to obey these laws meant one was punished according to the law. Thus, there was little or no freedom of conscience with regard to how one could believe and practice their religious views. Subsequently, many were persecuted for their views. In particular, a group of Christians known as the Puritans were persecuted for their religious views. Subsequently, many of them fled to Holland. They became known as Separatists because they completely separated from the Church of England. Later these Christians fled to the New World as pilgrims who founded the Plymouth Colony. Another group of Puritans grew dissatisfied with the spiritual malaise of the Church of England even though they did not completely separate themselves from them. These Puritans under the leadership of John Winthrop, founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in what later became the environs of greater Boston.

What many do not realize is that these early colonial Puritans sought to establish their own version of a church-state governing system based on their understanding of the Bible. The New England charters (including the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and to some extent the later charter of New Hampshire) set up a government in which their views of the Church and the Bible became the law of the land. These church-state entities embraced a view of Protestant Christianity called Congregationalism (in England they were referred to as Independents). Today we refer to Congregationalism as a Christian denomination. At the time it was called a Christian sect. Those Christian sects that eventually made their way into the early American colonies which survive to this day include Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans (today also known as Episcopalians), Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, etc. Some Roman Catholics made their way to the colonies as well as the Quakers who came in significant numbers. However, by and large, most American settlers were Protestant and most came from Britain.

While the New England colonies were Congregationalist, the Southern colonies (including the Carolinas and Georgia) were mostly Anglican (i.e., established by the authorities of the Church of England), the most notable being Virginia. The Carolinas enjoyed limited toleration of differing sects. The middle colonies (New York, New Jersey, and Delaware) were more eclectic with roughly equal numbers of different sects. New York established multiple Protestant sects with toleration for dissenting sects. Maryland initially had Roman Catholic governing authorities (consider the name: Mary + Land) even though most settlers there were Protestant. Eventually it gave way to Anglicanism in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Maryland established the Act Concerning Religion in 1649, which guaranteed a certain degree of freedom to Trinitarian religious groups but maintained the death penalty for those that denied Trinitarian doctrine. Now at this time, Unitarianism was growing in popularity—the view that God is

one but not subsisting as three persons, Pennsylvania was founded by William Penn who was a Quaker. Quakers were the most tolerant of other religious groups. So, Pennsylvania allowed different sects to freely practice their religious views and attracted a large diversity of religious groups including Mennonites, Dunkers, Schwenkfelders, and various other German speaking groups.

The New England colonies and Virginia were the strictest colonies with regard to religious beliefs and practices. In order to be fully accepted in those colonies one needed to be a Congregationalist (in the case of New England) or Anglican (in the case of Virginia). If settlers were not of the mind to agree with those understandings of the Christian faith, they were excluded from the full privileges of citizenship in those colonies and sometimes oppressed and persecuted. These colonies (and to some extent other colonies as well) had other laws respecting religious views and practices that were strictly upheld including mandatory church attendance, baptism of one's infant, and so forth. The governing authorities were given the right to punish idolatry, heresy, blasphemy, and general non-conformity to religious beliefs and practices. Failure to obey these laws resulted in fines and in some cases when flagrantly ignored could and did result in death penalties although this was rare and not always enforced.

The most persecuted groups in New England and Virginia were Quakers and Baptists. Baptists fought long and hard for recognition in New England and Virginia for over 100 years. Taxes in these colonies were used to pay Congregationalist and Anglican ministers respectively. One could not gain a seat in the government unless you were a member of the established church. Churches were required to be granted a charter by the colony, so if you were Baptist or Presbyterian you could not receive a charter. But more disturbing was the degree of violence suffered in these colonies. Sadly, there are well known accounts of Quakers being executed in early New England including the famous Mary Dyer, for propagating Quaker views contrary to the law. Even in later years in Virginia during 1760-1778, as many as 78 Baptists ministers were beaten, whipped, or jailed for preaching without a license. The Anglican establishment viewed the less educated and cultured Baptists as a threat to society, likening them for example to the radical Anabaptists in Munster, Germany during the Reformation who fomented brutal uprisings. They feared (albeit irrationally) that the Baptists would likewise incur similar violence against the citizens of Virginia. With state sponsored support, many Anglicans tried to forcibly suppress the spread of Baptist churches. A firsthand description of brutality against this persecuted group by Anglican protesters paints a typical situation during this period: "While at devotion, a mob collected, they immediately rushed upon them in the meeting house, and began to inflict blows, on the worshippers, and produce bruises and bloodshed, so the floor shone with the sprinkled blood the days following."

As you can see the American colonies were not uniformly established as bastions of religious freedom. In virtually all of the colonies some form of basic Christian conformance was required (i.e., mostly Protestant) with some colonies stricter than others. In fact, key leaders in the New England colonies wrote and preached diatribes against democracy including John Winthrop, Massachusetts Bay Colony's first governor and John Cotton its first important theologian. Theocracy mediated via a ruling class of properly qualified men was regarded as the only biblical form of government for Church and commonwealth. These men argued with the Congregationalist turned Baptist, Rogers Williams, eventually evicting him from the New England colonies. Williams then founded the colony of Rhode Island which was specifically founded upon the principle of religious freedom. Its laws did not require citizens to hold to specific religious views or practices so long as basic law and order was maintained. Williams was a Puritan in every other way, but believed that his Puritan views should not be encoded into law. While the Bay Colonists believed that the establishment of religion by the state was necessary in order to preserve civic order and Christianity (this was the common view throughout the Western world), Williams disagreed. He believed this would lead to religious corruption. Religion is a matter of the heart not external adherence to a set of laws forcing one to believe and behave in a way that does not proceed from the freedom of one's will and conscience. He believed such enforced religious laws

produced a kind of pharisaism that resulted in the heart-less corruption of true Christianity that the Bible condemns. Even though he disagreed with Quakerism, in principle he could see no reason why Quakers should not be granted freedom of conscience to practice their religious views without interference from the state. In fact, his views were conversely reflected by the Quaker William Penn several decades later.

This viewpoint was not well received in the early colonies, especially among its political leaders. Rhode Island had little influence in this regard. However, over the course of 150 years (i.e., from the early 1600's till the late 1700's) the tide would change especially among the populace. As a diverse religious population in the colonies grew (immigrants pouring into the colonies from wide religious backgrounds), there also grew a stronger and stronger distaste for specific religious establishments encoded into the constitutional documents and laws of the various colonies. The colonies, under pressure from the populace and increased numbers of diverse clergyman, began to loosen the laws enforcing religious compliance, especially after 1689 when the Toleration Act in England allowed greater religious freedom both in England and in the American colonies.

Furthermore, the Great Awakening in the late 1730's to the early 1740's did much to transform the religious landscape of the colonies. This wide-scale revival transcended denominational lines uniting believers of broad doctrinal persuasions. One of the fruits of the revival was a unity among Christians based on the common experience of regeneration and spiritual renewal. Itinerant evangelists like George Whitefield traveled all across the colonies to churches of many different traditions preaching the same gospel message that brought thousands to a saving knowledge of Christ. This uniting of believers through the gospel tended to put a dark cast upon establishment churches. Often those that opposed the revival were those clerical leaders that retreated to the fortress of the establishment churches. These ministers became known as the Old Lights (in New England) or Old Side (in the middle colonies). Those that supported the Awakening were known as New Lights or New Side ministers. These ministers called for changes in the church-state relations and implored many parishioners to abandon the establishment churches and form new dissenting Separatist churches. Thousands took up the call. One of those who did much to change church-state relations in New England was the Baptist minister Isaac Backus who was converted during the Awakening. He was a staunch supporter of the Separatist ideology throughout the late Colonial and Revolutionary period of America.

Thus, various cultural, political, and religious changes in both England and America fueled the fires of a growing distaste for establishment church-state law and had a profound influence on the mind-set that sparked revolutionary fervor in the Revolutionary period from the 1760's onward. Religious freedom was consummate with political freedom from the coercive and oppressive government practices of British rule. The democratic impulse of the politically and religiously diverse population began to spell the end of the church-state marriage as the American Revolution came into full force. Also, it became increasingly clear that religious freedom promoted economic growth. Where religious and political liberties flourish, economic growth, and prosperity flourish. Pennsylvania experienced some of the greatest economic prosperity among the colonies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and many Founding Fathers saw that this was directly tied to William Penn's vision for religious liberty in that colony.

Important proponents of religious freedom among the Founding Fathers included Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Both were from Virginia and had been sequestered by Baptist leaders who pleaded with them to secure religious freedom in Virginia and in the establishment of the national government. Virginia hung on stubbornly to its church-state establishment with greater tenacity than even New England by the time of the American Revolution. Both men fought hard primarily to disestablish Anglicanism in Virginia and then any sort of religious establishment in the federal government. It is important to understand their perspectives. Jefferson was not a believer even though he was a member of the Anglican Church. The latter was simply the reality by virtue of his citizenship in the colony of

Virginia. Jefferson was the least religious of the Founding Fathers and had a distaste for Christian sects altogether. He did not like the doctrinal distinctives of the various Christian sects. However, Jefferson was attracted to the ethics of the Bible. He sought to separate its moral teachings from its specific doctrines which included things like the deity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, baptism, the Trinity, miracles and so forth. He believed the moral teachings of Christianity coincided with natural reason (i.e., what appears to be plain to one's common rational sense). He fought for religious freedom because he thought the Church corrupted government with its sectarian doctrines. However, this has been misinterpreted to mean that Jefferson rejected everything about Christianity. That is not true. He firmly believed its moral teachings were important for the establishment of any just and successful government. In this attitude he was in agreement with virtually every one of the Founding Fathers.

James Madison's religious views are somewhat a mystery. He probably tended toward deism as did Jefferson, but he clearly was concerned about the religious persecution he saw in his native Virginia due to its establishment of Anglicanism. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some" referring to the Baptists. Madison was sympathetic towards the underprivileged class of Baptists and was motivated by her leaders who saw things differently than Jefferson did. While Jefferson was concerned about religion's encroachment upon government, the Baptists were concerned about government's encouragement upon religion. Madison believed as did the Baptists, that government had no business telling people what they should believe with regard to religious viewpoints. Once again, that did not mean that the Christian religion did not provide a moral foundation for government. As was said, virtually all the Founding Fathers believed that government should be founded upon a set of wise ethical principals and virtually all of them believed these principles were best embodied in the teachings of the Bible and Christianity. Since they believed the ethics of Christianity coincided with natural reason there was no conflict when they adopted the former as a basis for America's Constitutional framework.

Madison was instrumental in not only establishing the United States Constitution (he is often called "The father of the Constitution"), he was primarily responsible for the passage of the Bill of Rights which principally included the First Amendment that states in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The first part of this statement is referred to as the "Establishment Clause." The second part is referred to as the "Free Exercise Clause." The interpretation of the First Amendment is hotly debated today, but the best evidence suggests that the way it is to be interpreted has much to do with the historical context just described. The framers of the Bill of Rights (Madison included) were persuaded by the ratifying conventions of most states who believed it would be detrimental for the Federal government to establish a specific brand of religion. Given that Colonial and Revolutionary America was overwhelmingly Protestant in orientation, what that meant was that no specific brand of Protestantism should be established as the federal rule of law in America. What this did not mean was the complete eradication of the influence of religion in government, specifically the Christian religion. Nor did it appear to eradicate the religious establishments in many concurrent state Constitutions. Had this been the meaning, few states would have ratified the Bill of Rights.

However, the sort of religious expression most Founders envisioned by the federal government was a kind of generic one, free of specific doctrinal distinctives of the various Protestant sects (although Roman Catholics and Quakers presented marginal problems with this Protestant hegemony). Furthermore, they saw that influence as being for the most part restricted to ethical principles embodied in Christian teachings and to a lesser extent broad consensus on Christian teachings like the belief in one true God (generally delineated in Trinitarian doctrine) and the after-life of heaven and hell (it was widely believed that the promotion of rewards and punishments in the after-life secured law and order within society). Thus, this vision did not rule out a kind of civic religion in which the Protestant God

was looked to as the providential guider of our nation and should be turned to for help via public proclamations of national prayer and fasting, etc.... In fact, the first sessions of Congress not only made such proclamations, but they also legislated provisions for Protestant military chaplains and even funds for proselytizing Indians to the Christian faith. Furthermore, regular church services were held in Congress until after the Civil War. Even Jefferson, was known to attend these services during his tenure as president. Although there was vigorous debate in the various state legislators, many argued for laws respecting a “general assessment” tax for religious purposes. In other words, the states could levy a general tax to be used for the support of ministers and religious causes of the denomination of one’s choice. Many argued that this did not contradict freedom of religion or the establishment of a particular denomination or sect. Of course, the more Separatist leaders like the Baptists ministers Isaac Backus and John Leland disagreed as did Thomas Jefferson.

The degree to which the state and the church should intersect was a matter of debate during the Revolution and early Republic and makes a clearly defined interpretation of the Constitution and the “Establishment Clause” problematic. It appears that the Framers of the Constitution saw the federal government exercising very limited power, particularly over the individual states. James Madison, who vigorously fought to disestablish Anglicanism in Virginia saw no need to make provisions in the federal Constitution protecting religious liberty. The reason why is because he believed the federal government had no business meddling in affairs that were left to the states. The federal government was not to regulate religion one way or the other, thus the Constitution is largely silent on matters pertaining to religion. Although Madison personally believed that no government should make an establishment of religion including state governments, he believed strongly in limited federal powers in the matter. This is in spite of the fact that he was a federalist. Federalism believed in a stronger central government. Thus, when he promised to draft amendments to the Constitution that became the Bill of Rights in order to appease Antifederalists, he did so reluctantly. The Antifederalists were concerned that the federal government would be given too much power and so they demanded a bill of rights to protect the citizens of the states, particularly their religious liberties.

Yet it seems in principle; the First Amendment was drafted in such a way as to not prohibit individual states from maintaining freedom in making provisions toward religious establishments in their state constitutions and legislatures if they wanted to. Some believe the language of the “Establishment Clause” was deliberately ambiguous for this reason, although this is a matter of some speculation since we have no records of the congressional debates involving the evolution of the language in the First Amendment. However, subsequent history seems to favor the designed ambiguity. For example, Congregationalism remained the state sponsored denomination in New Hampshire until 1816, in Connecticut until 1819 and in Massachusetts until 1833 (even though it did not interfere with citizens who choose not to support Congregationalism with their taxes). Of course, Antifederalists and Jeffersonian Republicans like the Baptist minister John Leland believed that all states should disestablish their denominations like Virginia did. With this Madison agreed, but the First Amendment was obviously not interpreted that way by several states in the early Republic. Thus, the First Amendment appears to have been designed to please both Federalists and Antifederalists. In this regard, the Constitution and subsequent Bill of Rights was not necessarily what each of the Framers would have intended personally, but what they believed would be approved by the various state ratifying conventions. Thus, the ambiguity reflects the inevitable compromise that is necessary when seeking to meet the differing expectations of political constituencies.

Much of the modern debate over the “Establishment Clause” concerns a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut in 1802. In offering his personal interpretation of the “Establishment Clause”, Jefferson spoke of a “wall of separation between church and state.” In the course of concurrent politics and jurisprudence no one had ever used this phrase to speak of the First

Amendment and it was largely forgotten until it was resurrected in Supreme Court cases in 1879 and later in 1947. In the latter case, concerning state funding for the busing of students to and from Catholic schools (*Everson v. Board of Education*), Justice Hugo Black used the phrase to strike down the practice as unconstitutional. He then added that the wall must be “high and impregnable” between church and state. Legal scholars and historians have criticized Black in what is referred to as “law office history.” In other words, legal research often cherry picks evidence to support a case and ignores contrary evidence. In the case of *Everson*, Black’s argument suggested that Americans were uniformly agreed that the government should stir entirely clear of any support of religion. He used the opinions of Madison and Jefferson and extrapolated from them a consensus among all Americans of the post-independence period of the early Republic. However, the notion of a strict separation was far from the consensus as already noted.

Upon examination of a draft of the Danbury letter in 1998 by the FBI, new evidence suggests the motive of Jefferson for writing the “separation” phrase. A portion of the draft was blacked out at the suggestion of Jefferson’s Attorney General. That portion was uncovered in the FBI investigation and indicates that Jefferson understood his comment, “wall of separation,” to have a narrow meaning restricted to himself and the presidency. The newly revealed portion reads in part, “performances of devotion [can be] practiced indeed legally by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of a national church... the duties of my station are merely temporal.” In making this statement, Jefferson was alluding to a long-standing Western tradition among heads of state as having a dual function, one spiritual and one temporal (i.e., political). In other words, his function was divided between that of a priestly one (i.e., *sacerdotium*) and a kingly one (i.e., *regnum*). This was the way the monarchs of England functioned because they were the head of the spiritual affairs of the Church of England as well as the temporal affairs of the state. The new government of the United States clearly rejected this notion. Thus, Jefferson was distinguishing between what he believed was the role of the traditional English monarch and the presidency of the United States. In his mind, the president had no responsibilities to support or direct the church. This is why he refused to make religious proclamations like fast days and thanksgiving days as did his 2 predecessors Washington and Adams. However, he never felt prohibited from attending church services throughout his presidency held in the House chambers. But this did not engage him in any leadership capacity as the president. Thus, it appears that Jefferson understood the idea of separation of church and state to refer to the duties of the president and presumably his administration. The responsibilities of leadership for the president were strictly temporal (i.e., political) and the responsibilities of leadership for the church are left to others. No doubt in Jefferson’s mind, this latter duty was relegated exclusively to the clergy.

There is less controversy over the “Free Exercise Clause” of the First Amendment. The Founders did establish consensus that American citizens should have total freedom to practice whatever religious beliefs they chose so long as they do not violate the just laws of the nation forming an orderly and peaceable society. Whether the Founders envisioned this freedom to include religions other than Christianity is not always clear. Judaism had a minor presence in America and Unitarian belief came into vogue in the late Colonial and Revolutionary period. Quakers denied many essential doctrines common to Protestants and Roman Catholics. However, with the exception of Judaism, all these variations were loosely connected with Christianity in one degree or another. The majority of Americans remained Protestant and the presence of other religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. could not be foreseen on the distant horizon. It is safe to say that the Founders envisioned America as a broadly Protestant country and probably did not see how that would change. Yet in principle, it seems hard to dismiss the notion that the Constitution did not envision the possibility that such diverse religions could be freely embraced by the citizens of the nation if they so choose. It would militate against the basic notion of liberty that the Founders fought to secure. In either case, it appears the majority of the Founders held that the basic structure of the government was based upon a broadly Christian set of

ethics and basic (though minimal) Protestant leaning beliefs that they would not want to see undermined by religious viewpoints that opposed such a foundation.

Given these considerations, was America founded as a Christian nation? If one means by that the establishment of a church-state system whereby specific beliefs concerning doctrine and practice were the rule of law, then no. Nobody could rightfully make that argument. On the other hand, the nation was profoundly influenced by the ethic and basic worldview of Protestantism. The early Republic co-mingled Christianity and government in significant ways. However, the manner of interaction was broadly ecumenical in orientation, creating a civic religion that was inclined toward Protestantism but devoid of favoring detailed beliefs in order to avoid controversy. There was certainly no acknowledgement of what constituted the gospel or other distinctives that could be identified with contemporary evangelical belief. Furthermore, the founding was also influenced by Enlightenment Rationalism that was at odds with Christian beliefs at many points. But this did not appear to curtail the Christian influence. There was in some degree a kind of happy syncretism between the two worldviews. It is also noteworthy that the religious disposition of most of the Founding Fathers was at best a broad form of Protestant Christianity. Few of the Founding Fathers could be identified within the Puritan tradition that gave rise to the Evangelicalism of the pre-revolutionary days of the Great Awakening. Among those that could be identified in this stream of Christianity would be Samuel Adams, John Jay, Elias Boudinot, John Witherspoon, Noah Webster and perhaps to a lesser degree Patrick Henry and Benjamin Rush. Otherwise, the Founders embraced both liberal and nominal forms of Christianity. Some embraced loosely deistic patterns of thought to one degree or another including Unitarian beliefs. Others cannot be clearly identified (e.g., Washington and Madison?).

Having said this, it should be acknowledged that any nation worthy of existence ought to be founded upon basic ethical principles stemming from a Biblical worldview (see Rom. 13:1-6). However, it would be a violation of other Biblical principles taught in Christianity to establish a nation in the present age that mandates people to believe certain doctrines and religious practices. The New England Puritans were wrong in this regard and Roger Williams was right. To compel people to adhere to Christian doctrines and practices against their conscience is to form an external brand of Christianity that is legalistic and eventually fatal to true Christianity. Everywhere that Christianity (or any religion for that matter, be it Islam, Hinduism, etc...) has been established as the state religion of any nation or government, it has led to oppression, darkness, bondage of its people; and in the case of Christianity, corruption of the truth and vitality of the faith. Likewise, wherever religious freedom has been secured, Christianity has flourished. Such is the case in America.

Some other thoughts are important here as well. One of the reasons why the New England Puritans established their colonies with the intention of creating a Christian commonwealth had everything to do with their interpretation of the Bible. They saw themselves as the "New Israel." What this meant was they interpreted the Old Testament in such a way as to unilaterally apply it to the Church today. Old Testament Israel was established as a theocracy complete with a specific land, specific laws that governed both religious and civic practices, and a hierarchy of religious and governmental authorities to mediate the theocracy. The Puritans believed that there is no distinction between Old Testament Israel and its practices and the New Testament Church except in the case where Christ fulfilled Old Testament types and shadows in His atoning sacrifice on the cross. Thus, they believed that a large majority of the Old Testament laws, practices, divine promises, etc... apply to the Church today establishing it as a geo-political as well as religious entity. The magistrate was regarded as a divinely sanctioned instrument of protection for the Church and its moral, religious and societal interests. Post-Reformation Protestantism adopted the model of Christendom established by Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In this regard, the magisterial Reformers differed little from the Roman Catholic Church when it came to the intersection of religion and politics

(The radical Anabaptist Reformers disagreed, believing in strict, sometimes radical, separation of Church and state). In order to support this state-church interpenetration, proponents throughout church history have appealed to Isa. 49:23. Based on this passage it was believed that for the Church, “Kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and queens thy nursing mothers.” The notion that the civil magistrate was to assist and support the Church was widely held even in the early American Republic.

Given more attention to what the Scripture teaches, the whole church-state concept is an erroneous view of matters. The New Testament never commands the Church, the body of Christ, to establish itself as a nation complete with a whole governing structure. In other words, there are no New Testament commands to establish a Christian nation. The Church is strictly a spiritual entity. It does not occupy a specific piece of geography. It transcends geography. It is not instructed to establish a form of government. If so, then believers would have to leave the United States and find a new place to do so just as the Puritans did here because America as it was eventually founded did not become such an entity (no doubt to the chagrin of the Puritans had they been present during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787). The early Puritan colonists firmly believed that just like Israel, God had called them to a New Promised Land, the New World of America to establish the New Israel. That project failed as later American colonists eventually rejected this notion with its strict provisions of adhering to a narrowly defined set of doctrines and practices upon pain of punishment if one dissented. Furthermore, how would such a mandate apply to Christians living in oppressive nations like China, Iran or Sudan? Would they be required by scripture to leave these places and join other Christians to form a Christian government and nation? There are no such instructions in the New Testament.

The Church is to live in the world but not be of the world. We are to respect the existing governmental institutions and to be salt and light in whatever nation we live. In other words, the Church’s mandate is to proclaim the gospel and build up the body of Christ as a spiritual body that honors Christ and obeys his Word no matter what the circumstances, no matter what sort of government they live under. We are not called to reform government. And we are certainly not called to reform the American government and bring it back somehow to its supposed Christian roots. God has ordained government to serve a specific but limited function in His grand economy for history, particularly in the present time (Rom. 13:1-6). That function is to uphold justice, goodness, and peace in society and to punish those who seek to undermine or destroy these principles. The state does not function in conjunction with the Church as the proclaimer, arbitrator, or sustainer of the gospel. That is strictly the function of the Church, and the government should stir clear of interference with that mandate. This means there is a Biblically designed separation of church and state. Each is given an authoritative role in God’s design, and they should not exceed the bounds of that authority and role. This, however, is not a strict separation. The ethics of the Christian worldview should influence the government and should in fact have a prominent place in its judicial codes. In this regard, Christians in some places have an opportunity (such as in America) to call government to be responsible to its God-given role to uphold Biblical justice and ethical treatment of its citizens, but we are not responsible when the government fails to do so. We are, however, responsible to fulfill the role God has given us as the Church and we will be culpable if we fail in that regard.

Revelation 2:5 says: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent.” Some have applied this verse (and other like it) not simply to the Church but to our nation. The assumption seems to be that because as Christians we are citizens of this nation and that because this nation has departed from its supposed Christian foundation therefore, we are responsible to repent and restore those foundations or else Christ will remove our lampstand (i.e., our influence presumably upon other peoples and nations). However, this passage does not address people or Christians as citizens of a nation; it is addressing the Church. In fact, it is a specific letter to the church of Ephesus. The Ephesian



Church did not abandon some political principles that govern a nation, it had abandoned its love for Christ (see verse 4). It had failed to be a beacon of the love and grace of the gospel of Christ in what was already a dark and perverse nation. Rome at this time had become a great persecutor of believers in Christ. This was no call to reform the Roman government. And it is certainly not a call to reform the American government or any government for that matter. It does not address a nation or citizens of a nation at all. It addresses members of the body of Christ, the Church. It calls it to repent of its lovelessness for Christ and others and to return to simply being the Church—the Church as a light in a dark world. It is inappropriate therefore, to apply this verse otherwise.

Others have quoted from 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 which states: “If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Again, this passage is often used in reference to America as a wayward nation. But can this passage be legitimately applied to America? The context of the passage is the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, a specific feature of the religious geo-political system God ordained for the nation of Israel. The passage has specific application to the nation of Israel and no other nation. It is bound up with specific promises and purposes that God had with no other nation or people and so it cannot be applied elsewhere. The Puritans would have used this verse to apply to their understanding of the New World because they believed God had specifically called them to this New Promised Land to establish a theocracy. But that experiment failed, and it suggests the reason for its failure has to do with the fact that they misinterpreted the Old Testament. God did not really call the Puritans to establish a New Promised Land as the New Israel otherwise the experiment would have succeeded. In fact, anywhere such an experiment has been tried it has failed (Europe today is the most secular place in the world). It does not reflect God’s purposes for the Church or for the State. In saying this, I do not mean to insinuate that the Puritans were entirely mistaken in their desire to establish a Christian community on the shores of the New World. Nor do I believe God was not providential in bringing them here. Without their Christian influence America would not be the great nation that it is today. The early Puritans reflected a godly people who sincerely desired to honor and glorify God. However, they could not foresee, in some cases, the consequences of their vision for a Christian commonwealth. Their vision suffered from unintentional myopia and for that we must be careful not to cast too many aspersions upon them.

The vast majority of Puritan theology is sound, especially when it comes to the broad orthodox doctrines of Scripture and the ordinary practices of the Christian life. However, their ecclesiology (i.e., the doctrine of the Church) was flawed, in particular its view of the Church’s relationship to the government or the state. It is also true that America has drifted a great deal from the intentions of the Founding Fathers, and this is to be lamented. America’s founding is much more complex and nuanced than most people unfamiliar with the history suppose. Nonetheless, it still represent the best attempt were are likely to see in this present age before Christ comes and establishes the sort of government we all look forward to in the millennial reign (Isa. 9:6-7). Therefore, we have good reasons to preserve what the Founding Father sought to establish, particular with regard to religious freedom and the moral foundations (derived from Scripture) that any good government needs if it is to flourish.

For helpful perspectives on some of these issues, I recommend the following books:

Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2008). It is also published under the title, *Founding Faith: How Our Founding Fathers Forged a Radical New Approach to Religious Liberty*:

James H. Hutson, *Church and State in America: The First Two Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).