

AMERICA 250 — PART 4

Where Did the Founders Get Their Ideas?

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Bible Verse:

Psa. 19:7 The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple;

Psa. 19:8 The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD *is* pure, enlightening the eyes;

Introduction

Welcome back. This is Part 4 of our America 250 series, and today I want to give us more information about how the Bible shaped the culture of the American colonies in the 1770s that often gets left out of history books. We will learn how the invisible hand of God, quietly worked behind the scenes, for over 3,000 years. God worked through various men from clergy to lawyers to scholars, to develop the ideas that shaped our wonderful nation.

There's a popular story told about America's founding: that the Founders were children of the Enlightenment—rationalists, deists, maybe even skeptics—who drew up the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution on purely secular principles. But that story is, at best, a caricature. At worst, it's simply a lie.

Over these five short episodes, I'm tracing a direct line from the Bible—both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament—to the founding documents of the United States. Today, we follow that line through the courtrooms of Pennsylvania, the libraries of England, the log cabins of the frontier—and ultimately, into the classroom of one extraordinary man.

THE PAINTINGS IN HARRISBURG, PA.

Let's start in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the chambers of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

Historian and legal scholar Col. John Eidsmoe has written a fascinating three-volume work called the [*Historical and Theological Foundation of Law*](#). In it, he describes the paintings on the walls of chambers of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court—and they tell a remarkable story.

One painting is titled *Revealed Law*. Moses is depicted, hammer and chisel in hand, carving the Ten Commandments from stone. A second painting, also called *Revealed Law*, depicts Jesus speaking to a crowd, with the Beatitudes shown in the lower panel.

A third painting shows the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, bowing before an altar with a cross. Below it is a prayer Justinian himself wrote:

“Man, considered as a creature, must be subject to the Laws of his Creator, for he is an entirely dependent being ... Such are these Principles: That we should live honestly. That we should hurt nobody. And that we should render to everyone his due.”

Justinian understood something the Declaration of Independence would echo 1,200 years later: God is the Creator, and we are the creature. That distinction is fundamental. It's why the Declaration says we are "*endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights*." Rights come from God—not from government. Justinian's law code was based on the Bible.

BLACKSTONE AND THE COLONISTS

Justinian's law codes shaped a man named William Blackstone, an English jurist who in 1765 published his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*—four volumes that became the most important legal textbook in America for over a century.

Here's a striking fact: between 1765 and 1775, more copies of Blackstone's *Commentaries* were sold in the American colonies than in all of England. The original subscriber list reads like a who's who of the founding generation—John Adams, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, who had personally studied under Blackstone at Oxford, and many other noted statesmen, lawyers, and educators.

And what did Blackstone say about law? He wrote: "*Man depends absolutely upon his Maker for everything. It is necessary that he should in all points conform to his Maker's will. This will of his Maker is called the law of nature.*" Again, recognizing the Creator-creature distinction, derived from the Bible.

Now, you may have heard that the phrase "*laws of nature*" in the Declaration is a sign of Jefferson's deism and John Locke's deism—a rejection of Scripture in favor of cold rationalism. That claim simply doesn't hold up to history. Last time we learned that Locke derived many of his ideas from the Bible and was a firm believer in the authority of the Bible and Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Many people assume that phrase comes from secular Enlightenment philosophy. But Christian theologians had been using it for *five hundred years* before the Declaration was written—as a description of God's moral law written into creation and into the hearts of all people. That's exactly what Romans chapter 2 describes—the law written on the heart, the conscience bearing witness.

Thomas Aquinas used the phrase in the 1200s. John Calvin used it. Early Puritan theologian William Ames used it, defining it as "*the law of God, which is naturally written in the heart of all men.*" And in 1764, James Otis—arguing against the Stamp Act—declared that the essential rights of the British Constitution were founded "*in the law of God and nature.*"

From the 1300s all the way to Blackstone in the 1760s, "the law of nature" meant one thing: the eternal moral law of God. That's what it meant when it appeared in the Declaration of Independence.

A LOG CABIN AND A GREAT AWAKENING

Now let me take you to a log cabin in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania—and introduce you to a man you may never have heard of, but whose influence helped produce some of America's most important leaders.

In 1718, a Scottish Presbyterian minister named William Tennent immigrated to Pennsylvania. He was a gifted scholar—fluent in Greek, Hebrew, Latin—and he had sons and students to train for the ministry. In 1727 he built a small log cabin school in Bucks County. It would later be nicknamed, not entirely kindly, the *Log College*.

It was a modest place. But what came out of it was not modest at all. Tennent's son Gilbert went on to study at Yale, then partnered with the Dutch Reformed revivalist Theodore Frelinghuysen. Together, they helped spark what we now call the First Great Awakening—the great revival of the 1730s and 40s that swept through the colonies, brought the Bible to life for ordinary people, and ultimately shaped the moral and spiritual climate of the Revolution.

When George Whitefield arrived in America in 1739, he and the Tennents fed each other's fire. The Log College's graduates were spreading a Bible-saturated Christianity through the middle colonies. And when Tennent died and the Log College closed, its mission was taken up by a new institution—the College of New Jersey.

JOHN WITHERSPOON AND THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

In 1768, the College of New Jersey—which we know today as Princeton—called a Scottish minister named John Witherspoon to be its president. He would serve for 26 years, until his death in 1794.

Witherspoon was not just an administrator. He taught the divinity classes personally—lecturing on the Bible, theology, and political theory. He introduced his students to thinkers like Locke and Montesquieu, but always through a biblical lens, always asking: what do these ideas have to do with what God has revealed?

The numbers that came out of those small classrooms are almost unbelievable. In 26 years, 478 men graduated—averaging just 18 per year. Because the classes were so small, Witherspoon's influence on each student was deep and personal.

Among those 478 graduates: 114 ministers, 13 governors, 3 Supreme Court Justices, 20 U.S. Senators, 33 Congressmen, a Vice President—Aaron Burr, grandson of one of the most significant preachers of the Great Awakening: Jonathan Edwards—and one President of the United States: James Madison, who stayed on after graduation specifically to study Hebrew under Witherspoon.

At least nine of the fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 had studied at the College of New Jersey. Six of those nine had studied directly under Witherspoon.

The man who signed the Declaration of Independence as the only active clergyman among the signers—who shaped the minds of a generation of American leaders—had himself been shaped by the Bible, trained in the tradition that ran straight from Scripture through the Reformation, across the Atlantic, and into a log cabin in Pennsylvania.

CLOSING

So let's trace the line one more time.

The Bible shaped Justinian's law codes. Justinian shaped Blackstone. Blackstone shaped the legal thinking of the founding generation. Meanwhile, the First Great Awakening—sparked in

part by the Log College—brought the Bible directly to the hearts of up to 80% of the colonial population. And men like John Witherspoon, trained in that same tradition, personally disciplined the men who wrote the Constitution.

This is not a story about theocracy. It's a story about ideas—and about where ideas come from. The idea that human beings have inherent dignity. That rights come from a Creator and can't be taken away by a king. That law must answer to something higher than power. These are not Enlightenment inventions. They are, at their root, biblical convictions.

It is the influence of the Bible that is the foundation of the United States—and it is biblical truth that has made America great. Remember, what made America Great was God, through His Word the Bible.

I encourage you read and study your Bible daily, for it will provide light for your life.

Close in Prayer