

Biblical & Social **JUSTICE** WHAT IS IT?

An Everyday Person's Guide to Understanding Justice
And the Role of the Church in Our Society



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CHAPTER 5



A Nation Founded on Christian Principles?

“Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference.” ~Frederick Douglass, 1845

Any exploration of justice must include a discussion about the founding of our nation. Stating that the United States was founded on the Bible and on Christian principles is a source of great pride for many Christians in America.

America was established by God for the propagation of the gospel across the globe and to demonstrate God’s grace through a government that promotes and defends liberty. Of course, America has many blemishes and flaws. Our nation is neither perfect nor blameless. One thing we can say for sure is that America has been the best model of freedom this world has seen. ²⁴

There is no evidence that America was established for the purpose of spreading the Gospel around the world. It is true that freedoms afforded to many Americans allowed missionaries to travel abroad to spread the Gospel. At the same time Black Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries were enslaved, not allowed to learn or read, and denied “unalienable rights.” An honest view of history reveals the brilliance of the United States Constitution as a governing philosophy that has stood the test of time, but ungodly deeds should not be overlooked.

²⁴ *America the Prosperous*. (2018). <https://www.afa.net/the-stand/faith/2019/11/america-the-prosperous>

Sowing ungodliness at the founding of the nation, reaped horrors later, as we shall learn.

It is typical for Christian nationalists (those who promote the view that America was founded by Christians on Biblical principles) to promote a narrative that pushes the horrors of injustice down to the level of “blemishes and flaws,” like a bad paint job on an otherwise great car. Some attribute all outcomes to the Sovereignty of God, whether the enslavement of Africans, rape, wars, or massacres. Of course, God is Sovereign, but it is not for people to explain, understand, or use that truth as justification for wrongdoing or injustice. One of the most important attributes of God is His mercy towards us.

Survey Responses

On the question: *“Was the United States founded on Christian principles?”*

R1: No. How can a nation be founded on Christian principles when they stole the land from Native Americans, and they used slavery of black people to build it? There is nothing Christian about that. That’s hypocrisy!

R2: Not all the founders of the United States were Christians, but most of them were (roughly 2/3). It is my understanding that the Founders who wrote the U.S. Constitution, wrote it based on principles that stemmed from a Biblical worldview that recognized God as the Creator and man as the created thing. And, that all authority is in God and He gives man limited authority over other men through a legitimate civil government. So, it is likely that the U.S. was founded on Christian principles; notwithstanding that two-thirds of the founders were slaveholders.

R3: No. The laws of this country condoned slavery which is contradictory to Christian principles.

R4: Yes. Look to documents of the Founding Fathers. Including, but not limited to, the U.S. Constitution.

R5: To some degree on Christian principles, as they were the dominant ideas in the colonies at the time. Certainly not “Biblical” principles as the only founder with a theological background was John Witherspoon and his theology was deeply influenced by the Scottish Common Sense Enlightenment. Henry May wrote a very good book on this called *“The Enlightenment in America”* where he argues that the Enlightenment and Protestant Christianity fought a battle at the founding and eventually Protestant Christianity emerged ahead by around 1800, but that it had been profoundly changed by its struggle with the Enlightenment and no longer looked like the Protestantism that had preceded the Revolution.

R6: No! For the sake of this research report, here is a short quote from our first American treaty submitted to congress by the former Vice-President to George Washington and then second President, John Quincy Adams: “As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...” (Treaty of Tripoli, Article 11, May 26, 1797).

The Framers and the first President, George Washington, were aware of God, and it was customary to invoke His name on special occasions. On October 3, 1789, one week after Congress approved the Bill of Rights, President George Washington made an official Thanksgiving Proclamation²⁵:

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor—and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially

²⁵ Washington, G. (1789). *Thanksgiving Proclamation*. National Archives and Records Administration. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>

by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted—for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions—to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually—to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed—to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord—To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and us—and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand at the City of New-York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

These were wonderful sounding words from the first president. Statements such as this are presented as evidence that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. References to “this people,” “to render our national government a blessing to all the people,” “the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed,” and “our safety and happiness...” did not include all people. One might think his words “pardon our national and other transgression” may have indicated his regrets about owning slaves and supporting slavery. Mary V. Thompson, a Mount Vernon historian wrote,

“There wasn’t much evidence prior to the revolution that he ever considered slavery to be wrong. He’s leading a war where people are saying that people are born free, that freedom is a God-given right,” Thompson said. “And he’s not stupid. He can see the hypocrisy of owning slaves.”²⁶

Invoking the name of God was, and is, a common practice. “In God We Trust” was first inscribed on U.S. coins in 1864 under President Lincoln. In 1956 Congress made “In God We Trust” the national motto of the United States. As we are all aware, invoking God’s name and submitting to His will are often unrelated actions. Christian nationalists have long promoted romanticized narratives about the Framers of the United States.

Perhaps above all, those who forged our nation's documents and laws were God-fearing people, with a basic Christian outlook on life, morals, and government, which set the course for maintaining the freedoms we now take for granted.²⁷

²⁶ Brockell, G. (2019). Mary V. Thompson, *Mount Vernon Historian (Interview)*. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/08/25/george-washington-owned-slaves-ordered-indians-killed-will-mural-that-history-be-hidden/>

²⁷ Morris, J. (2001). *In What Ways Has God Blessed America?* Institute for Creation Research. <https://www.icr.org/article/what-ways-has-god-blessed-america>

Whatever the religious beliefs of the Framers, they decided not to make the Bible the explicit basis of the Constitution. The Constitution contains no references to Jesus Christ or citations from Scripture, something that any Christian document would provide. There is also evidence that many of the Framers were influenced by their practice of Freemasonry, which many believers in Christ do not find consistent or compatible with the Biblical doctrine of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

America's Wealth and Slavery

There is also the view that the great wealth of the United States and our cutting-edge innovations in areas of agriculture, industrialization, and, later, technology are evidence of the blessing of God. A detail that's often excluded from discussions about the wealth of our nation is the magnitude of the contributions of African American slaves and free slave labor from 1619 through 1865.

Why would a slave have so much value? A short answer is the value of a slave is the value of the expected output or services the slave can generate minus the costs of maintaining that person (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, etc.) over his or her lifetime. A quick list of the data that have to be considered in determining the value of a slave's expected revenue would include sex, age, location, how much he or she is likely to produce (a factor that included a slave's health and physical condition), and the price of the output in the market. For a female slave, an additional thing to consider would be the value of the children she might bear. (Williamson & Cain)²⁸

Slavery in the United States was an institution that had a large impact on the economic, political and social fabric of the country. ²⁹ A study conducted by Samuel H. Williamson and Louis P. Cain gives an idea of its economic magnitude in 2016 values. The calculation re-

²⁸ *Measuring Slavery in 2016 Dollars*, Samuel H. Williamson and Louis P. Cain, <https://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php>

²⁹ *Ibid*

vealed the astounding estimate that the value of slaves and slave labor in 1860 amounted to \$14 trillion in 2016 money. ³⁰

Listening to the stories of Christian nationalists, one might become persuaded that the United States descended from heaven.

Any assertion that the United States was founded on Biblical and Christian principles must also concede that slavery was part and parcel of those Biblical and Christian principles.

It is not necessary to attribute the founding of the nation to the Bible or an organized Christian effort. Any review of the actual history of the founding of the United States, absent spiritualized narratives, shows that highly educated and brilliant men were responsible for debating, working, and creating the founding philosophies and documents. All the Framers were informed by their education, experiences, and faith. They were also informed by selfish motivations and economic interests.

Below is a Summary of the Framers:

Almost all of the 55 Framers had taken part in the Revolution, with at least 29 having served in the Continental forces, most in positions of command. All but two or three had served in colonial or state government during their careers. The vast majority (about 75%) of the delegates were or had been members of the Confederation Congress, and many had been members of the Continental Congress during the Revolution. 25 had been state governors.

More than half of the delegates had trained as lawyers (several had even been judges), although only about a quarter had practiced law as their principal means of business. Others were merchants, manufacturers, shippers, land speculators, bankers or financiers. Several were physicians or small farmers, and one was a minister.

³⁰ Ibid

Of the 25 who owned slaves, 16 depended on slave labor to run the plantations or other businesses that formed the mainstay of their income. Most of the delegates were landowners with substantial holdings, and most, except for Roger Sherman and William Few, were very comfortably wealthy. George Washington and Robert Morris were among the wealthiest men in the entire country.

Of the 55 Framers, only one was a Christian minister. Regarding the religious faith of the Framers: Of the 55 delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention, 28 were Anglicans, 21 were other Protestants, and two were Roman Catholics (D. Carroll and Fitzsimons). Among the Protestant delegates to the Constitutional Convention, eight were Presbyterians, seven were Congregationalists, two were Lutherans, two were Dutch Reformed, and two were Methodists. A few prominent Founding Fathers were anti-clerical notably Jefferson.³¹

It is a reach of imagination and romanticism to believe the 55 Framers acted as a group of Christians in consultation with the Scriptures and prayer. The work of the Framers, as is the case with most good work owes to the skill of the persons working, whether Christian or non-Christian.

One very significant factor argues against the rosy Christian nationalist perspective about our nation's founding: **SLAVERY.**

For many of us, celebrating our nation's founding as a triumph of the Bible and Christianity is offensive given the treatment and property status of our ancestors. To be sure, the formation of the United States, developing the governing documents, and organizing independent colonies was a triumph of human enterprise and self-governing. The telling of history cannot overlook owning, selling, and abusing humans

³¹ Lambert, Franklin T. (2003). *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

in the service of other humans used to build their economy was decidedly ungodly. It was not something Jesus would have done.

The historic facts regarding the formation of the nation are compelling reading without the hyperbole of a Christian nationalist narrative. The facts are far more interesting than the fabrications.

Formation of the United States

The first Continental Congress met in Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia, from September 5, to October 26, 1774. All of the colonies except Georgia sent delegates. These were elected by the people, by the colonial legislatures, or by the committees of correspondence of the respective colonies. The colonies presented there were united in a determination to show their combined authority to Great Britain.³²

The objective of the first Continental Congress was not to declare independence from Great Britain, which some desired to do, but to work on issues related to their relationship and dealings with Great Britain. Due to policies imposed upon them, living under the authority of Great Britain and King George III became untenable.

The Second Continental Congress convened on May 10, 1775 with representatives from 12 of the 13 colonies in Philadelphia shortly after the Battles of Lexington and Concord. The Second Congress functioned as a de facto national government at the outset of the Revolutionary War. All thirteen colonies were represented by the time Congress adopted the Lee Resolution which declared independence from Britain on July 2, 1776.³³ The Declaration was a formal explanation of why Congress had voted to declare independence from Great Britain, more than a year after the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War. The Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 4, 1776.

³² *First Continental Congress*. (2020). Independence Hall Association. <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/congress.html>

³³ Wikipedia contributors. (2020). *Second Continental Congress*. Wikipedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Continental_Congress

The American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), also known as the American War of Independence, was initiated by the thirteen original colonies against the Kingdom of Great Britain over their objection to Parliament's direct taxation and its lack of colonial representation.³⁴ The Revolutionary War was won in 1781 with the help of the French.

Following the war, the Constitutional Convention was convened to work on the United States Constitution. The Bill of Rights were the first ten amendments to the completed Constitution, which was finally ratified on June 21, 1788.

For all the wisdom of the Constitution, it is my view that the Framers should have abolished slavery when the nation was founded. This would have been the Christian thing to do, notwithstanding the extreme difficulty in doing so.

The profitability of slavery, dependence on slave labor by 16 of the Framers, and the nation's economic interests outweighed applying Biblical principles. By 1789, five of the Northern states started to gradually abolish slavery. Early Americans should have also dealt justly with Native Americans.

Failing to end slavery as a nation resulted in a future of immense misery, division, and suffering leading to the Civil War with 618,222 deaths as Americans maimed and killed one another.

As a candidate for the US Senate, Abraham Lincoln gave a remarkable, and prophetic, speech in Springfield, Illinois on June 16, 1858 in which he said:

"A house divided against itself, cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.

³⁴ Wikipedia contributors. (2020). *American Revolutionary War*. Wikipedia. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War

The rise of Christian-sanctioned white supremacy in the 19th and 20th centuries (through theological justifications offered by the Southern Baptist Convention and other pro-slavery theologians),³⁵ and instances of domestic terrorism against Black people by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were a blight on the 20th Century. Bigotry against, and false narratives about, African Americans continue to the present day.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson wrote with keen insight long ago, in 1930;

By their peculiar “reasoning,” too, theologians have sanctioned most of the ills of the ages. They justified the Inquisition, serfdom, and slavery. Theologians of our time defend segregation and the annihilation of one race by the other. They have drifted away from righteousness into an effort to make wrong seem to be right.³⁶

None of the preceding facts argue in favor of a nation established on Biblical or Christian principles, especially if one believes Jesus Christ as the core of “Christian principles.” Acknowledgement of the truth about our nation’s history is a key component to genuine racial reconciliation.

³⁵ Jones, Robert P.. *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (p. 34). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

³⁶ Woodson, Carter, G. 1933 *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (p. 43). Kindle Edition.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the best case that America was founded as a Christian nation?
2. What are arguments against America being founded as a Christian nation?
3. How could Christians be slave owners? What was the justification?
4. Why were Black people not accepted as United States citizens?
5. Where does the Constitution approve or forbid treating persons as slaves?
6. What was the consequence of slavery becoming a part of the founding of the United States?
7. What Scriptural and social justice action can we employ to help in the above issue?

About The Author



Bryan Hudson has a passion to serve God's purpose in ministry, community, missions to Africa, and digital media. As a senior pastor with more than 38 years experience, empowering people through Bible teaching and practical wisdom is his mission. As an author of 10 books and host of the Firm Foundation Podcast and Blog with over 1000 articles, Bryan is a thinker and commentator on the key issues of our time. Bryan has earned degrees in Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Science in Media Arts & Science, Master of Science in Instructional Design, and Doctor of Ministry.

He has been recognized for contributions to the State of Indiana and youth mentoring. For 20 years Bryan conducted multimedia empowerment programs for youth to equip the next generation of digital media producers. For 42 years, Bryan has been married to Patricia Ann Hudson (B.A., M.S.), an inner-city public school educator. They have raised four children, have two grandchildren, and reside in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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