

The Founders Meant to Keep Government Out of the Church, Not God Out of the Government

PAUL STRAND

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The 4th of July makes us think of our independence and freedoms. And legal battles in recent years over religious liberty in the U.S.A. raise serious questions about the freedom to worship in America. So when our Founders came up with the First Amendment, were they trying to keep the government free from religion, or religion free from government?

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As the Providence Forum's Peter Lillback put it, "They recognized having a monolithic church was a dangerous thing." That's because it made the king not only their physical sovereign but also their all-powerful spiritual ruler.

Before the Pilgrims fled England, Wallbuilders' David Barton recalled, "The Pilgrims' pastor was executed because he made the statement that Jesus Christ is head of the church. And the monarch said, 'Oh no, I'm the head of the church. You're dead.'"

Wouldn't Allow a Church of America Like the Brits Had the Church of England

Knowing of such terror and tyranny, AmericanMinute.com historian William Federer explained how the Founders felt: "Their big fear was the federal government was going to follow the blueprint of every country in Europe and pick one national denomination."

So what they meant by saying in the First Amendment "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" was that the federal government was banned from creating – or "establishing" – a national religion with the national government wedded to it.

"They didn't want to have a national, established Church of America like you have the Church of England, forcing people to believe something that they didn't believe in," said Jerry Newcombe, host of the radio program "Vocal Point".

"What they said was, 'We don't want a state church here. Consciously, therefore, they were separating the church from government,'" Lillback said.

But that was strictly to protect the churches and each believer's faith and conscience from the government.

All About Protecting Each American's Conscience and Freedom to Believe

Not only did the First Amendment say, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," but it also said, "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

"What they wanted was the freedom that we have in the Bible: the rights of conscience," Barton said. "And they didn't want the state telling us how we could or couldn't practice our faith."

Lillback said the Founders keeping government control away from faith meant, "Each of us has a right to be who we are before God. It has been well said and it's a classic statement of religious liberty that man is not free unless he is free on the inside. We have to have the freedom to believe what we believe. That's what the First Amendment protects."

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government out of the church, not to keep the influence of the church out of the government.

There was no antipathy towards the Lord in all of this, Lillback insisted, saying, "But the idea of God: He's on both sides of the wall. And He's welcome there. And He should be."

The Government Is Reaching Over that Wall, Bossing Around People of Faith

But today, there's been a complete flip.

Lillback said, "Those who once believed in this really high and impregnable wall of church and state, we now see the government reaching over that wall and saying, 'but don't preach that text of scripture.'"

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Barton added, "All of a sudden the government's regulating religious activities, which is what Jefferson said they would not do because of separation of church and state."

Hyatt lamented, "The Founders would be so distressed to see how that statement has been turned on its head."

As Newcombe explained, "They absolutely did not mean the separation of God and government, which is what's often being practiced today."

No One 'Under Government,' but Each One 'Under God'

Lillback encourages Americans to remember what the nation's Founders intended.

"This is a theistic government. So God was not separated from government," he insisted. "So any interpretation of the First Amendment that takes God out of government is turning the whole story on its head. Rather it was taking a formal state church out of the equation, leaving it up to each individual. But all, as we still say, 'under God.' That was the view of our Founders."

They believed a nation based on liberty could only stay free if its citizens were godly people. As Barton pointed out, believers in God have their eyes on eternity, and it makes them practice self-control.

Knowing You'll Answer to God Makes You Govern Yourself

"When you're God-conscious, you realize, 'ya know, I'm going to have to answer to Him for what I do,' and it limits my bad behavior," Barton stated.

Newcombe added, "That's something the Founders believed very strongly: that we're going to be accountable before God."

Hyatt said of those Founders, "They knew that they were creating a nation for a free people, but also for a virtuous people who would govern themselves from within."

You need very little police power if people, because of conscience, will police themselves.

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why when we look at our Declaration of Independence, there are four references to Deity.

Going through the Declaration, Lillback laid them out: "We're endowed by our Creator with certain *inalienable* rights.' The laws of God and nature. And it tells us there's an appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world. And, finally, a dependence on the Providence of God. Four references to Deity."

Not Godless at All

But then came the US Constitution, which some say is a godless document because God isn't mentioned in it. As soon as they were done with it, though, the Founders called for a day of Thanksgiving to God.

"They were not thinking 'let's get rid of God,'" Lillback stated. "They said, 'We have been given now a new Constitution, and now amendments that give us our freedoms. And where do we turn? We turn to heaven and thank God for this.'"

"Now, if their intent was to get rid of God from government, boy did they miss their point," Lillback said. "Because they turned around and thanked Him for everything that they had. It shows the utter historical absurdity of 'the godless Constitution'."

Constitution's Last Words Reference Christ

And God isn't really absent from the Constitution or its authors' lives.

"They are not godless," Lillback insisted. "They are people who, at the very end of their work, said, 'In the year of our Lord, 1787.' The very last words in the Constitution are a reference to Jesus Christ."

He concluded, "It's no surprise then that the ultimate motto is We are One Nation Under God."

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About The Author



Paul Strand

As a freelance reporter for CBN's Jerusalem bureau and during 27 years as senior correspondent in CBN's Washington bureau, Paul Strand has covered a variety of political and social issues, with an emphasis on defense, justice, government, and God's providential involvement in our world.

Strand began his tenure at CBN News in 1985 as an evening assignment editor in Washington, D.C. After a year, he worked with CBN Radio News for three years, returning to the television newsroom to accept a position as a senior editor in 1990. Strand moved back to the nation's capital in 1995 and then to

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