

Gospel Perspectives on Politics Part 3

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[0 : 0 0] Okay team, welcome. We are inveterate storytellers.

We instinctively implot our lives, embed ourselves in some narrative which gives us a sense of identity and meaning and orients us and energizes our being, becoming, and believing in the world.

And we've spoken of how, as Christians, we seek to have the gospel narrative principally formative. But in addition, we find our imaginaries under the influence, perhaps even under the thrall, of other stories we live within and out of.

Stories which color our lenses and animate our actions and our reactions. And some of these stories, powerfully operative for believers and unbelievers alike, are those we tell and inhabit about who we are as a nation.

What was our beginning as a people and how that formative origin has a bearing, perhaps even a claim, on who and how we ought to be today.

[1 : 3 7] So my ambition this morning is to take us back in history to examine some of the stories that have become some of the weight-bearing columns in the narrative edifices erected around our nation's founding.

Central pillars in the stories of how America came to be. And so, in some enduring sense, who we are. So, let's do so in relation to what we might think of as two foundings.

First, largely the Puritan settling of America in New England. And second, the political founding of our nation and the nascence of its independence.

First, a disclosure. This historical territory is heavily trodden by vast research and seasoned judgment.

And my boots are not nearly as well trodden as such experts. So, if some present can provide thicker ice for my thin, always likely at a place like this.

[2 : 4 8] I see history PhDs, even as I glance out here. Okay. Then I thank you in advance. Well, with that, let's turn to the first founding.

The vision of the first settlers of New England is well captured from the pen of one of its principal architects, John Winthrop, aboard the Arbella, conveying these zealous old England intrepids to their new home.

This new plantation, Winthrop urged them, was to be a city on a hill. A shining display of a society or commonwealth, as they called it, ordered in all things according to the will of God.

And the controlling framework for understanding this errand in the wilderness was that of covenant. As Winthrop had explained to his fellow immigrant seafarers, God hath entered into covenant with us, and we with him, giving us a special commission.

And, quote, we, and when God gives a special commission, Winthrop warned, he looks to have it strictly observed in every article.

[4 : 08] He continues, The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.

We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

So, who were these hopeful covenanters, so zealous to render God a heartfelt, comprehensive obedience? Surely, if they were partied in such a covenant, they were saints.

Those in whose souls God's spirit had miraculously wrought his gracious, saving, regenerative work? Well, not entirely.

Not at least by their own reckoning. They made a distinction and considered it vital between visible saints, the manifestly regenerate, and those perhaps hopeful of regeneration, but not yet subject to the spirit-saving work.

[5 : 32] Only visible saints could comprise the church and be its members. All others could and must consistently attend all the means of grace, the preaching and all, but not as communicant members.

So, the first order of business for the collective commonwealth, the covenanters, was to constitute or gather, as they called it, from among themselves a church.

From the newly arrived, I mean, fresh off the boat, seven were chosen, whose regeneration was undoubted to all, had to be a unanimous vote.

And that core of seven sifted, in their terms, sifted all the rest. Every candidate for membership had to give an account of God's gracious, saving work in their life and show how their subsequent life exhibited conclusively its effects.

If they were able to give a credible account in the judgment of charity, they passed the test and were permitted then to subscribe to the church covenant.

[6 : 44] So, this is a different one. The church covenant, by which they promised to join the other members in worship, holy living, and mutual watchfulness. And this was the pattern and practice across the first plantations of New England.

It was so in New Haven Colony, our very own. 1638, when the first settlers got off the boat, they immediately gathered a church. By unanimous selection, the first core of visible saints were chosen, who then sifted all the aspirants.

Many were called to the trial, but fewer were chosen to the church covenant. But all were part of the common covenant of plantation, as they called it, to render a full obedience to God's will outlined for his people in the scriptures.

Nothing shall be attended unto in the ordering of this plantation, wrote the first foundation document, except the word of God. We're not going to pay attention to anything else, just the word of God.

Now, one may wonder how those commonwealth covenants felt who failed the trial of the church membership. The majority.

[8 : 02] And it's difficult to say. I mean, doubtless there were some hardened sinners who cared more for their tankard of ale than who were bothered about their exclusion from the communion cup.

As one cleric put it, the people be like the blacksmith's dog.

So you've got to imagine the image here, sleeping soundly next to the anvil, though the preacher clang, with the hammer blows and be preaching, ever so loudly upon it, they're unstirred, asleep like the dog.

So yeah, yeah, yeah. There were people like that in Puritan New England. Okay, at least the preachers say so. But it seems a great majority of these non-visibly elect were conscientious Puritans who diligently attended upon the means of grace and prayed that those means might be effectual in their operation upon them, but did not want admission to the church without that.

They were serious about that. And it was these neighbors, they called them neighbors of the saints, fellow members of the commonwealth, who unanimously voted, unanimously, to restrict the civil vote to the visible saints, excluding themselves.

[9 : 28] For, as they expressed it, they preferred that civil government be in the hands of the saints. For, so shall the power be less likely abused.

Interesting. Not a power grab. Interesting. Here, you take it. Please. We trust you more. And if there were those who thought themselves abused by this arrangement of godly rule, there are surprisingly few complaints on record.

And it's worth realizing that allowing all the church members to vote significantly extended the franchise compared to their mother England.

Hardly anybody was going to have any sort of access to political activity, you know, in old England. Also worth noting, one group excluded from holding office in civil government was the clergy.

So if we think of, or refer to, Puritan New England as a theocracy, let's be careful of what we mean by that.

[10 : 32] Yes, the entire commonwealth was in covenant to obey God in all particulars of life. The Bible was the blueprint for society. There was not much of a written code of laws, as the laws were just simply adopted from the Bible.

In New Haven, they just said, they called it, Moses, his judicials. Just brought them over. Okay? By the way, people, you know, sometimes I'll talk about this and people, you know, to secularists, they'll, oh, how barbaric.

You know, they're only, you know, they're, in, in, in, uh, common law in, in England, you know, there were over like 300 capital offenses.

The Old Testament only has 11. You know, I mean, so this is really the height of legal progressivism, you know, if you think about this. But in any case, that's an, that's an aside. Um, uh, so, uh, yeah, so Moses, his judicials, that's what they call the law in New Haven.

And if some trouble arose on the New Haven green, you know, some offending perpetrator would be brought to the governor, Theophilus Eaton, who would open his Bible and, and read the divine ordinance that, that had been transgressed.

[11 : 44] You know, maybe he would read Romans 13, 13, not in rioting or drunkenness, not in chambering or wantonness. All right. And, uh, then depending upon the severity, prescribe the discipline, perhaps the stocks for, for, for, for the night.

Um, if Governor Eaton found a particular case really difficult, he might call upon the minister, John Davenport, but not in any official capacity.

No, no office to do that. Only as a consultant expert in scripture, the civil government was in the exclusive hands of lay church members, lay church membership.

Uh, uh, one of the remarkable features of these New England commonwealths was their internal unity. And indeed, this was thought critical for God to bless their special commission.

Remember, this is their term. We have a special commission to be a city on a hill. Now, of course, such unity was possible because there was so little diversity. diversity, or stated positively, uh, such a homogeneous society among the, you know, among the citizenry.

[12 : 58] There was no Jew. There was no Turk. There was not even a Roman Catholic to find the commonwealth objectionable or athwart their religious convictions. But, and this is going to be one of the key themes here, but eventually the mass migration of the 1630s, the 1630s, it was planted in 1630, Massachusetts, May God, would, would bring in a human flood.

And with these swelling inhabitants, more religious diversity. At first, those who failed to fit in and threatened the unity of the commonwealth could simply be expelled.

Like Baptist Roger Williams. There was land enough available in which to relocate the difference. Just sweep it out. Or, rarely, but in more extreme cases, executed.

Such as Quaker Mary Dyer. You know, we expelled her three times. She'd keep coming back. Didn't get the picture. So, hey, we executed her. Most commonly, exiles would end up in Rhode Island, which became a byword among Massachusetts Bay Puritans for that receptacle of all that is blemished, blinkered, and pestilential.

Boy, I love this stuff. Yeah. Yeah. That's where the Baptists locate. But when such minorities of divergent conviction began to increase in number as they did, not only through immigration, but also through proliferation, stress fractures began to appear in the long, hallowed model of government-upheld uniformity.

[14 : 32] And especially significant for the proliferation of diverse sects was the Great Awakening. Conspicuously, the Spirit seemed to be at work in the Great Awakening beyond the confines of religious establishment.

Thus, religious authorities were questioned and challenged. And to stir with the Spirit, new and freer forms multiplied, and new congregations outside the established church sprang up like mushrooms in damp shade.

It's a place that the Baptists like. Damn shade, I guess. But many of them were Baptists who chafed at the unfair, unjust advantage of the established government-supported congregational churches that they enjoyed.

It was the Baptists who passionately and trenchantly offered a critique of the New England way of establishment religion. Was it fair that Baptists, who were not part of the established churches, yet had to pay taxes expressly for their support?

Was that just? Was this not an instance of taxation without representation? Just grabbing that, you know, the aphorism that was so effective and applying it a little bit more widely here.

[15 : 59] Was it right for Baptists to have to petition, often unavailingly, for permission to preach? Which, if granted, was done so sparingly and grudgingly as a favor granted, not as a right inherent.

Should it be so that the sacred content of our faith and religious practice should be subject to civil law? Surely, religious opinion should be excluded from the objects of legislation.

If the prosecution of this case for religious freedom is of interest to you, I commend the writings and labors of New England Baptist Isaac Bacchus, 1724-1806, and John Leyland, 1754-1841.

Both strove mightily for the disestablishment of religion in the colonies. When will this great truth be acknowledged, pled Leyland, that neither the legislative, executive, nor judicial arms of government in their official capacities have anything to do with the souls of men, conscience, or eternity?

Why was this governmental non-interference and non-support viewed so vital to Leyland?

[17 : 23] Because he was convinced that history demonstrates that government involving itself in religion is bad for both religion and for government.

For it creates tyranny in government and hypocrisy in religion. It fosters tyranny in government. Leyland's earliest memories was that of being forcibly baptized against his will and conscience as a little boy in Massachusetts, the religious policy that the state government enforced.

It also fosters hypocrisy in religion. Leyland regarded Constantine's government support of Christianity, the subtle beginnings of disaster.

He had listened to Tyler's lecture. See, that's what happened there. And Constantine announces, I have cushy jobs for any Christians in the civil sphere.

Are there any Christians out there? Should we be surprised that multiple hands are waving? We are Christians! We're Christians! Give us those jobs! You know, it would be hard not to suspect, as Jesus did, that some were following for the loaves and the fishes.

[18 : 42] Referring to the Constantinian support of the church, Leyland grieved that it was then and there that, quote, Christianity was disrobed of her virgin beauty and prostituted to the unhallowed principle of state policy where it has remained in a criminal commerce until the present moment.

And if government may support religion by acts of legislation, what's the limit to their intruding into the sphere of grace?

Rather tongue-in-cheek, this is kind of a *reductio ad absurdum*, rather tongue-in-cheek, Leyland writes, How often have I wished that when rulers undertake to make laws about religion, they would complete the code?

Not only make provision for building meeting houses, paying preachers, and forcing people to hear them, but also to enjoin on the hearers' repentance, faith, self-denial, love to God and love to man.

That everyone who did not repent of his sin should pay five pounds. That all those who did not believe should pay ten pounds. That every soul who did not deny himself and take up his cross daily would pay fifteen pounds.

[20 : 01] That whoever did not love God with all his heart should be imprisoned for a year. And that if a man did not love his neighbor as himself, he should be confined for life.

Yes, these are Christian moral duties. But are they not the vocation of the church? The body of Christ?

The assembly of the regenerate? Where God's spirit animatingly dwells? Indwells, in fact? It is Christ's own who are, by his own saving work, gladly under the law of Christ, who have been made his happy subjects through regeneration, not legislation.

Yes, we appeal to our neighbors to be reconciled to God through Christ, but this appeal is by invitation and persuasion.

Never force, however benignly intended. And until they, our neighbors, freely enter the fold, while they remain outsiders, what reason or right would we have to think that they ought to behave or believe like believers, as the church believes or behaves?

[21 : 22] Really? We're going to expect that of them? We're going to demand that of them? Really? As the apostle writes, 1 Corinthians 5.12, For what have I to do with judging outsiders?

Is it not those inside the church whom you, as Christians, judge? Whom you are to judge? So this takes us to the heart of what appears to be a muddle of our first founders, which muddle has had a long afterlife and indeed continues with us still.

Did our first founders rightly affirm a covenant relationship between their New England plantation and God?

Has God granted them, like the King of England, granted them their charter, a special commission as a commonwealth, to quote Winthrop?

This is their claim. Well, let's probe. What was this national covenant? It certainly was not the new covenant.

[22 : 31] That was between Christ and his bride, the church. And the Puritan planners recognized this and distinguished the church from the commonwealth, the saints from the citizens or the neighbors.

Well, if not the new covenant, what covenant was this civic commonwealth covenant? Well, it was based in their mind on the old covenant that God entered with the commonwealth, third nation of Israel.

The covenant between God and the seed of Abraham according to the flesh. But surely we must ask, is any such covenant between God and some favored nation in present operation?

It's exceedingly doubtful, to say the least. Hebrews attests, in speaking of a new covenant, God makes the first obsolete.

Hebrews 8.13. Paul argues in Romans, say 2.28.29, that the special covenant status of Israel, Abraham's physical seed, does not pass to some other specially commissioned nation or nations.

[23 : 51] Galatians rather passes to the gathering of individuals from all and any nation united by inward faith, the inward faith of Abraham.

And as Paul insists in Galatians 3.29, if you belong to Christ, not Massachusetts Bay Colony or Old England or New England or America or any other nation, if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs to the promise.

It would appear that biblically there is no national covenant. Did I just say it would appear biblically that there is no national covenant in present operation?

I believe I did say there is no currently operating national covenant. Okay. To sum up, we have told a story of our first foundation as a commonwealth overwhelmingly zealous to establish a society governed in all things by the will of God.

What must strike us as a breathtaking errand, they were fortified in by their conviction that they were in plantation-wide covenant with God.

[25 : 17] And that they were so long and broadly successful, realizing this vision was largely a function of how united behind it their rather religiously homogenous society was.

But there were outliers and losers in this New England Israel, in the growing array of inhabitants who did not share in the vision or differed in conscience in some particular and chafed under the imposition of conformity.

Progressive expulsion of non-conformists helped to let the steam out of the growing dissonance, but the swelling influx of newcomers, of deeper and more determined diversity, put more and more pressure on the covenant model and its maintenance.

And it's noteworthy that the most articulate and impassioned critics of this privileged establishment religion, albeit Christian religion, were not the secularists or the irreligious, rather those with deep Christian conviction who were convinced that such a union of church and state was bad for both religion and for government.

And it was these views of Leyland and his Baptist brethren and their experience of state persecution that would prove germinal and salient in what we are calling America's second founding, to which we now turn.

[26 : 54] The second founding. By the second founding, I refer to the coming together of the 13 colonies in pursuit of the common goal of independence from Britain.

And one thing is noteworthy, perhaps even remarkable, is that when it came to forging a policy for the nascent nation on religion, these founding fathers, or the second founding here, contemplated the approach taken by their first founding forebearers and ultimately rejected it, very self-consciously.

They ultimately rejected it. Through a process of contestation and compromise, what eventually prevailed seems to be well summarized in a three-fold creed.

And here I'm drawing on the work of one of the more acute scholars of this question, Stephen Waldman. And if you want to read one good book on this stuff, this would be a good one. Whoops. That would be a good one.

It might upend some of your current views. It's symbolic of that process. So this little three-fold creed.

[28 : 11] One, religion is essential to the flourishing of a republic. Two, to thrive, religion needs less help, not more, from government.

Three, all have the right to full religious freedom. Freedom. What came to be inscribed in our foundation documents was the commitment to religious liberty, a formula for promoting religion by leaving it alone by the federal government.

How did this radically new approach to religion emerge? Why did it commend itself to the founders of our nation? Well, for one, the old model of an established state-supported religion imposed by law, workable under conditions of a homogenous commonwealth, ceased to be viable in the face of growing religious diversity of the population.

By the time of the revolution, the religious minorities, once few enough to be handled by exile or execution, were now in the majority.

Before 1690, 90% of the churches across the colonies were of the established denomination.

[29 : 45] 90% were of the established denomination. So this would have been congregationalism up in New England, Anglicanism in the southern colonies. And 90% by 1770, only 35% were part of the established, the establishment church.

Such was the effect of the Great Awakening, we've already mentioned that a little bit, and immigration. As far as immigration, the population swell that we've already noted in the colonial period, it just continues unabated in the young republic.

From 1776 to 1820, it's less than, you know, not much time. 250,000 immigrants arrived to make a new life in this new nation, bringing with them a new range of religious practices and beliefs.

Lutherans, Presbyterians, Moravians, Mennonites, Catholics, Huguenots, Dunkers, I could go on. More. And now, to our modern eyes, this might seem pretty uniform.

I mean, after all, with the exception of a smattering of Jews, everyone was still some stripe of Christian. True. But, to the first settlers, they felt awash in a kaleidoscope of religious exoticism.

[31 : 09] Yeah, and just, I mean, to, and to the patriot leaders, the new boots on the ground, coming in from all over the place, put the writing on the wall, to mix my metaphors.

There was no dominant faith, and there would likely never be one in this new nation. And there were many for whom, seemingly, religion was not that important.

Judging by church attendance, historians estimate that religious adherence in 1776 is only at 17%.

Wow! That's certainly lower than America today. I mean, even with this kind of new slump and record lows, we're at least at 30% now.

That's 17% in 1776. Puts a new spin on the good old days. Um, another solvent of the old official religious establishment model was the need for joint action in the common endeavor of fighting Britain for American independence.

[32 : 24] George Washington's Continental Army was probably the first truly national institution. The fighting men came from all parts of the country.

Massachusetts Congregationalists, Rhode Island Baptists, New York Episcopalians, and Dutch Reformed, New Jersey Presbyterians, Maryland Catholics, Pennsylvania Quakers, and all manner of sects in Pennsylvania.

They were a little looser there. And even a scattering of Jews fought in Washington's army, the Continental Army. And throw in the mix somewhere between something, between 5,000 and 12,000 German Hessian mercenaries mostly Lutheran who defected to the American side during the war.

And you have what certainly the neighbors would have felt looking across the fences to be pretty exotic a menagerie, a religious menagerie. Commander-in-Chief Washington knew that if he were to forge an interfaith army he would have to cultivate and uphold some religious tolerance.

And so the Continental Army became the first laboratory of this experience, this experiment. As the men fought and slept beside each other and were hospitably housed and fed across the land as they traveled by strangers of different faiths, bigotry slowly gave way to respect.

[33 : 53] And their commander-in-chief was model in this regard. He allowed his soldiers, Washington allowed his soldiers to pick their own chaplains unconstrained. Some wanted a Unitarian chaplain, they got a Unitarian chaplain.

And he insisted on mutual tolerance. Don't bash the Roman Catholics. They're fighting just as bravely, they bleed the same kind of blood. Don't bash them.

Well, while we are contending for our own liberty, Washington urged his troops and the nation for which they fought, we should be very cautious of violating the rights of conscience of others, ever considering that God alone is the judge of the hearts of men.

And to him only in this case, they are answerable. Well, as nearly as diverse as the new Continental Army was the Continental Congress with delegates of various states coming together including Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and even a Roman Catholic in the Continental Congress.

One of the first acts in Congress was to consider a resolution that the next day's session be opened with prayer read by my Anglican minister. Well, at first, the motion floundered as some non-Anglicans opposed.

[35 : 20] Not hearing any prayer from an Anglican. Finally, it was Sam Adams. Oh, and Sam Adams was no friend of the Church of England. Oh, no. Sam Adams rose and stated a view that would slowly but increasingly become prevalent that he was no bigot and could hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend of this country.

As with their brethren in arms, part of Congress's evolution toward pluralism was likely due to the simple fact that it, the Continental Congress, was the most religiously diverse that any of the delegates had ever encountered.

and to defeat Britain, they, like their brethren in arms, would have to set aside their religious disagreements and work together for the goal.

If these experiences influenced the nation's leadership and the nation itself to greater receptivity to an approach to religion differing from their first founding forebears, perhaps most critical for this shift in its formulation was the experience of its chief architect, James Madison.

It was a wave of religious bigotry in Madison's backyard that changed the course of religious policy in America. In 1774, from his Virginia home, Madison fumed, that diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages.

[36 : 58] Well, he referred to a wave of persecution unleashed by officials of the established Anglican Church in Virginia against local Baptists. from 1760 to 1778, there were at least 153 serious instances of persecution in Virginia involving 78 Baptists, including 56 jailings of 45 different Baptist preachers.

Many of them, many of those incidents, clustered around Madison's own county. So this is right in his backyard. Baptists were beaten, whipped, assaulted, incarcerated.

They'd even put him in a little jail cell and everybody would urinate on him. What was their crime? Well, unofficially, simply being a Baptist minister in an Anglican Virginia.

Officially, they were charged as being, quote, vagrant and itinerant persons and for assembling themselves unlawfully at sundry times and places under the denomination of Anabaptist and for teaching and preaching schismatic doctrines.

Though the court records have been lost, there's good indication, I'm confident that he did, that Madison, as their attorney, defended the Baptists in Virginia courts.

[38 : 11] Madison, in his memoirs, writes that he had, quote, spared no exertion to save them, the Baptists, from imprisonment and to promote their release from it. He was an attorney who was working there.

So, he... Patrick Henry, also a Virginia attorney, he defended dissenters, Baptist dissenters in court and he'd do it for free, gratis.

They tried to pay him, the Baptists would, you know, pass the hat and try to get up as much as they could. They were pretty poor and he gallantly just gave it all back, becoming a real hero to the Baptists.

Another Virginian, Jefferson, for his opposition to the forced imposition of state-sanctioned religion on minorities, the Baptists, he also became a hero of the persecuted Baptists who they hailed as defender of the rights of man and the rights of conscience.

This is the Baptists of Jefferson. Those were the words of John Leyland who continued, Pardon me, my hearers, if I am overwarm. I lived in Virginia 14 years.

[39 : 12] The beneficial influence of my hero, Jefferson, was too generally felt to leave me a stoic. When Jefferson attained the presidency in 1801, jubilant Baptists, all over Massachusetts, collectively convened, 900 cows to furnish milk to make an enormous, a mammoth cheese roll.

Cheese, you know, ah, that they had to, but yeah, they had to just put it in a massive wagon and bring it down and Leyland delivered it down to Washington, D.C.

to Jefferson to present to him. Jefferson is, he is, Jefferson was no Orthodox Christian, let alone Baptist. and Leyland had no illusions here, but they were united in this, that any intermingling of church and state came from, to quote Leyland, the same rotten nest egg which is always hatching vipers.

I mean the principle of intruding the laws of men into the kingdom of Christ. Well, back to Madison. The upshot of Madison's experience of the religious persecution of the Baptists in his Virginia backyard crystallized his conviction which he formulated as a policy proposal for the new nation, the Constitutional Convention.

quote, that all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience, unpunished and unrestrained by the magistrate.

[40 : 56] Now notice, notice this is going beyond toleration to the recognition of a fundamental human right, the exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience.

And integral to the upholding of this right for Madison was the buttressing clause of non-establishment. So you've got free exercise and non-establishment.

If the dominant religion could establish their religion as privileged, it would necessarily abridge the religious freedom of minorities. This position of Madison was by no account unanimously embraced by the state delegates at the Constitutional Convention.

While Madison wanted a strict separation of church and state, others did not. Delegates, especially from our own New England, wanted continued privilege and state support for the present established religion, their own.

Surprise, surprise. Okay. The solution that Madison shepherded through to adoption was a compromise and agreed upon for reasons that were often opposite among the delegates.

[42 : 25] they embraced this formulation for opposite reasons. While Madison wanted the First Amendment to apply as widely as possible, right down to the local level, he realized there was no consensus for this.

Too many wanted to keep their privileged, established churches. churches. So Madison conceded at the state level and clarified that this First Amendment was a declaration that at the, don't miss this, at the federal, federal government could not support or regulate religion.

But, that the First Amendment was also a declaration that the individual states absolutely could. They absolutely could regulate religion.

That was part of the compromise that enabled the First Amendment to gain wide and sufficient support. Notice that for many what appealed in the First Amendment was that it protected the state from federal government imposing any restriction on the state's ability to make their own laws with respect to religion.

It protected the state's ability to establish religion as they desired. Establishment religion persisted in many states for many years.

[44 : 01] 1817, New Hampshire. It's not disestablished until 1817. Connecticut, not disestablished until 1818. Massachusetts, not disestablished until 1833.

The First Amendment liberties did not legally apply to individual states until 1866 in the aftermath of the Civil War when Congress passed the 14th Amendment prohibiting states from enacting laws that infringed upon individual citizens' liberties.

And since then, since 1866, the courts have interpreted this to mean that the original federal Bill of Rights now applies to the states, a doctrine called incorporation, if I've got that right, Tyler.

In the end, so in the end, Madison got what was his way. He got his way. It was not the way favored by many of the founders.

Many thought separation of church and state a bad idea for religion because the state could and should help it to flourish. Christianity, the religion concerned here, would be better and stronger for it, so thought many and most.

[45 : 19] So I am, along with Madison and my Baptist forebears, convinced they were, however well-intentioned, wrong. I'm persuaded by Scripture and history that government's support of Christianity, at least Christianity, let's just regard Christianity, government's support of Christianity, ultimately harms it.

Now, I know this is, just as it was, contested. While John Adams and George Washington generally approved religious freedom, they thought, because religion is so important, it should be encouraged by government.

Patrick Henry went further and pushed for it to be actively supported. Thomas Jefferson's worries were on the other side, that religious influence would distort and corrupt the even-handedness that the state required toward all of its citizens.

The state should protect its citizens to believe and practice whatever they liked, so long as it hurt no one in life, limb, liberty, or property. The legitimate powers of government, Jefferson clarified, extend to such acts only, as are injurious to others.

But, it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg. But Madison, that was Jefferson, but Madison, to my mind, helpfully integrated the insights of both Jefferson and the Baptists that a separation of church and state was critical for both democracy and faith.

[47 : 05] He discerned both the threat of government restriction of religion and equally the harm of government support of it. The first, I think, is probably pretty clear.

I mean, we don't want government to tell us what to believe, to intrude upon the domain of conscience. us. The second insight is perhaps a little more subtle, that government help will ultimately hurt.

Well, clearly it hurts the unfavored faiths. If one religion is given favored first-class treatment, the rest receive second-class status.

And this, of course, creates just resentment toward the favored. It's not going to help the favored for everybody to be bitter toward the favored. The privileged Joseph with his government bequeath colored coat is surrounded by common-frocked bitter brothers.

than Joseph has deservedly held in disesteem. Okay? And political support makes religion, surprise, surprise, political.

[48 : 13] Political support makes religion political. And that leads to distrust of Christians by outsiders. And a snare to insiders.

For we like power, privilege, and patronage. And that corrupts us. If I have been given preferential treatment for being a Christian, how do you know, or even I know, that I'm not a Christian just for the perks?

Privilege paves the way to hypocrisy. If I'm even given a better parking place for my faith, how do you know that I'm not doing it for the parking place?

I mean, after all, this is New England. Parking place is quite tough. If we treasure our faith and its purity, do we want to intermingle it with such irresistible allurements of power, privilege, and patronage which government support can supply?

Do we really want that? If we love our faith, do we want government to touch it? I wish I were godly enough to be immune from such blandishments, but I'm not.

[49 : 39] So I want to put up some protective structures to buttress my best intentions but weak resolves to keep my faith pure. As one has put it, church and state when married bring out the worst in each other.

It's kind of like two mischievous boys in the back of the classroom who went together, get up to no good, best for everyone to just keep them separated. So in sum, this story from history I have offered is that in the ongoing experiment in this land of how to relate religion and civil government, some insights emerge.

The venture of the first founders to establish a Christian national religious covenant between God and this people, however sincerely intended and zealously prosecuted, ultimately floundered not only on the impracticality of the religious uniformity it required of an increasingly diverse population, but even on its own terms by its theological incoherence.

The Bible does not endorse a Christian national covenant. In the second founding, an alternative arrangement was hammered out and launched, albeit only on the federal level, the free exercise and non-establishment of religion.

For all the challenges of interpreting and applying this arrangement to the intricacies and complexities of American life, I have suggested there is a genius to it.

[51 : 17] I think it a good formulation that seeks to preserve two related goods, free exercise and non-establishment. Perhaps I might put it memorably like this, free exercise.

I don't want the government to feed me to the lions for being a Christian. But beyond self-interest, neither do I want my Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, or atheist neighbors to be fed to the lions for following their consciences and religion.

Non-establishment. I'm not safe to drive when drunk. So I want my keys to be taken from me. It's better for me and it certainly is better for everyone else.

Power to impose your will on others is intoxicating. It makes you drunk with the power of possibility. When Christians have had political power to impose our will on others, we have left a fairly consistently bad track record.

We have bullied and abused our non-Christian neighbors and even our differing Christian sisters and brothers. When we get behind the wheel drunk with the power of that opportunity to enforce our vision of the good, there is, as we have seen, lots of blood on the highway and it is blood on our hands.

[52 : 44] We should not be given the keys. It's not good for us or anyone else. This is so for Christians, I believe.

That, sorry, that it is so for Christians, I believe, is more of a scandal. It ought not to be so with us. We ought not to exercise power as does the world as our master himself makes clear.

Matthew 20, 25, 26. A worse scandal, but I'm not sure ours is a worse level of abuse. I'm not persuaded by history that non-believers or other religionists do any better with unrestricted power to impose their will.

people, how often has the cry gone up, Christians to the lions or it's endless variation, Christians to the gulags, Christians to the killing fields, Christians to the machete.

I don't want other religions established or atheism established for the same worries. I don't even want Christianity established until Christ returns and establishes his perfect expression in his perfect way.

[53 : 55] I just don't trust myself or frankly any of you. I know myself and us all too well. And so I am grateful in excelsis for the constitutional arrangement we providentially live under in America.

Let us give thanks to God that it is so and seek to support the institutions which protect and preserve it for us and our neighbors and hopefully our children and our children's children until the Lord returns.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.