

## Rediscovering and Upholding the Founders' Wisdom: A Key to American Renewal A Call to Repentance and Renewal in the United States of America

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It becomes a people publicly to acknowledge the over-ruling hand of Divine Providence and their dependence upon the Supreme Being as their Creator and Merciful Preserver... and with becoming humility and sincere repentance to supplicate the pardon that we may obtain forgiveness through the merits and mediation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.—Samuel Huntington, a signer of the Declaration of Independence Representing Connecticut—

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.  
—2 Corinthians 3:17—

**Key point:** God is the source of liberty, and Americans are losing liberty because we've ignored and in some cases rejected God. However, it isn't too late to change direction!

In a Bible study/history lesson recently published, we embarked on a quest to unearth what America's Founding Fathers would have thought about Marxism and what they believed about numerous Bible passages that speak to Marxist ideas. We concluded with this observation:

Karl Marx believed that the people exist for the government, but America's Founding Fathers believed government exists for the people.

Specifically, what did the Founding Fathers believe government ought to do for the people? The answer isn't hard to find. We see it clearly in the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration; and when he and 55 additional members of the Second Continental Congress signed their names to the document, they clearly identified the reason government exists. They declared (emphasis added):

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

—**That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,**—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Thus, America's Founders believed government exists, or that it ought to exist, to secure and maintain rights. This is more than significant. We must be very careful here, however; because, as we have said previously, the view of rights held by the Founders differs profoundly from the perspective on rights held by most Americans today. The Founding Fathers and early leaders of the United States understood that rights are *unalienable* and *God-given*. In other words, the rights government is charged to protect *already exist*, simply by virtue of the reality that God has created human beings in His image (see Gen. 1:26-28). God intends, therefore, for people to be allowed to act freely within the limits of reality and His law.

What are some of those rights? The Founders named three in the Declaration, but those they named did not constitute an exhaustive list. They said, “among these [rights that exist] are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

When the Constitution was drafted eleven years later and subsequently ratified, and particularly when the Bill of Rights in the form of the first ten amendments officially was added to the Constitution on December 15, 1791, other unalienable rights were officially named and recognized. Significantly, no exhaustive list of unalienable rights ever has been made. Historians Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen write,

The Ninth Amendment, which has lain dormant for two hundred years, states that there might be *other* rights not listed in the amendments that are, nevertheless, guaranteed by the Constitution. But the most controversial amendment, the Tenth, echoes the second article of the Articles of Confederation in declaring that the states and people retain all rights and powers not granted to the national government by the Constitution.

### **The Nature of Unalienable Rights**

Unlike the Founders, Americans today tend to think of rights as *created and maintained by government*. The Founders, by contrast, saw rights as already present; and, as we have said, they believed it was government’s job to *protect* those rights so that citizens could exercise them freely. Protecting rights doesn’t mean just that *government* has to stay out of the way so people can act, but also that government works to make sure that *citizens themselves* don’t hinder other citizens from exercising their rights and liberties.

The above statement echoes the convictions of James Madison, America’s fourth president. Madison has been called the “Father of the Constitution” because of the strategic roles he played in drafting the Constitution and

seeking its ratification, and for his work in drafting and ratifying the Bill of Rights. He observed, “It is of great importance in a republic, not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers; but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part.”

### **Negative and Positive Rights**

Inherent in our fourth president’s observation is a view of rights that is foreign to most modern Americans. You see, two kinds of “rights” exist. Let’s illustrate this briefly by considering the Four Freedoms Franklin Delano Roosevelt upheld in the State of the Union Speech he delivered on January 6, 1941. Roosevelt spoke of efforts to secure these freedoms, or rights, “everywhere in the world”:

- freedom of speech and expression,
- freedom of religion,
- freedom from want, and
- freedom from fear

President Roosevelt said,

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want, which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to

such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called “new order” of tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.

The first two of these — freedom of speech and expression and freedom of religion — are guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. How does government protect these rights? It stays out of people’s way, and it makes sure other people and groups stay out of their way so they can act freely. Significantly, government does this by rewarding or commending those who do right and by punishing those who do wrong, just as Paul and Peter described in Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Because protection of unalienable rights requires negative action on the part of government (making sure people remain unhindered and able to assert themselves as they see fit), an individual’s right speak freely and to worship according to his or her conscience are called *negative rights*.

Take notice! This isn’t the case with the third and fourth “freedoms” — “rights” to be free from want and fear. To secure *those* “rights,” government must take positive action. Thus, social observers call the third and fourth of Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms or “rights” *positive rights*.

Beware! When government acts to secure and maintain positive rights, it inevitably will have to trample on the unalienable rights of others. Two of the clearest examples of this I know of are the “right” to abortion (which deprives an individual of his or her unalienable right to life) and the “right” to same-sex marriage (which means

ignoring *everything* that nature teaches about marriage and family in and through the inherent differences that exist between males and females). People and nations who ignore and deny reality will pay a heavy price. Reality will fight back! It will come back to bite them in the butt — not because it is mean, but simply because it is what it is. As the late US Senator from New York Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed, “You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts.”

Consider this as well. When government acts to create and maintain positive rights, it almost always makes things worse, even when it has the best of intentions. Welfare has had the overall effect (see of exacerbating the problem of poverty rather than eliminating it or even reducing it somewhat (see <https://bit.ly/2EsjNFW>, <https://lat.ms/3P28wvq>, and <https://herit.ag/3R85hnP>).

Moreover, many would contend that numerous government efforts to alleviate fear and anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic not only have failed, but actually have increased them. Some “leaders” have even taken advantage of the crisis at hand and have sought to increase their own power. This is not to say that government never should address in any way issues like poverty or matters relating to public health; nor is it to say that such issues have easy solutions. It *is* to say that government does not have all the answers, and *especially* it is to say that it should recognize its constitutional limitations. It is the law in America that government *must* resist trampling on the constitutional rights of its citizens.

Unfortunately, with few exceptions, various government entities have not resisted this temptation. Some have even declared open season on constitutional rights. Up until now, some have gotten away with it; but they have acted illegally and illegitimately. Thomas Jefferson captured the spirit of a free republic when he declared, “Timid men prefer the

calm of despotism to the tempestuous sea of liberty.” Samuel Adams did as well when he courageously proclaimed,

If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude than the animated contest of freedom - go home from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains sit lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that you were our countrymen!

Returning once more to the so-called “rights” to abortion and same-sex marriage, we are

compelled to emphasize that these positive “rights” deny the obvious. In other words, they deny self-evident truths, even asserting that evil is good and good is evil.

Though clearly imperfect, America’s Founding Fathers could discern good from evil. They understood the realities that “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” unveiled in the moral and ethical realms of human existence. We must recover and once again uphold their perspectives — and not just the perspective America’s Founders held on rights. We also need to recover their understanding of liberty, law, equality, and the term *entitle*.



You’ve now read about half of an important Word Foundations feature you can access at <https://bit.ly/3ulH4k6>. I invite you to read the complete article, and after you do, I hope you’ll want to learn even more about the biblical underpinnings of America’s founding and how we as American Christians today can encourage our family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers — all the people within our spheres of influence — to revere those important ideals. This is how we will recover America! Please visit <https://bit.ly/3AoH32Y>, where you’ll find information about an important Bible study I’ve written and currently am making available without charge. The title of the study is *Principles of Liberty: Ten Biblical Truths Embedded in the Declaration of Independence*.

Thank you for your interest in learning about American history, and in upholding and preserving authentic liberty in America.

I close with two Bible verses, which you can read at <https://bit.ly/3IcYzZF>.  
B. Nathaniel Sullivan

<https://www.wordfoundations.com>  
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