

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Text: Joshua 24:14-15

Introduction:

1. According to the Bible, the function of government is to maintain societal order that promotes peace and liberty (Romans 13:1-7).
2. Through the concepts of "Nature's God," "Natural Law," and People's Law," the founders of this country sought to pattern government after God's wisdom.
3. One reason – perhaps the fundamental reason – for this was the principle of Religious Freedom.
4. Despite what is often taught in modern times, Freedom of Religion was a primary factor in the settling of the "New World" and the establishment of the American constitutional system of government.

- I. The Ideal: Theocracy (Exodus 19:3-6)
 - A. In *Federalist 51*, James Madison wrote: "**If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.**"
 - B. Of course, this is what God intended under the Old Testament system.
 1. He would be the King of Israel (cf. Isaiah 6:5; 43:15; 33:22).
 2. The people of Israel would be a kingdom of priests.
 - C. Thus, the Law of Moses was a civil law as well as religious.
 - D. Yet, even under this system, God allowed "freedom of religion" – that is, He allowed man to exercise his free will (cf. Joshua 24:14-15; 1 Kings 18:21; Isaiah 1:18; etc.).
 1. This was not without consequence – blessing or cursing.
 2. However, He even allowed them to reject and replace Him as King (1 Samuel 8:5-7).
 - E. How different might things have been had Israel allowed God to be their King?
 - F. Under the New Testament, God also established a Theocracy; however, this time it was a spiritual kingdom (cf. 1 Peter 2:9; Acts 8:12; Romans 14:17; Colossians 1:13).
 - G. Still, God allows man to exercise free will (John 6:66-67; 1 John 2:19).
 - H. Sadly, many have used this freedom to corrupt the Gospel and turn the religion of Christ into a tyranny of oppression both spiritual and physical.
- II. The Desire: Religious Freedom
 - A. Because of the abuse of the Scriptures, many have sought religious freedom throughout history.
 - B. The early church longed to practice their faith free from persecution (Acts 22:20; Revelation 2:13).
 - C. On June 15, 1215, wicked King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta (Great Charter) granting rights to the barons and lords of the land.
 1. This included the right of representation, especially in taxation.

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- 2. It also included the right of *habeas corpus*, providing protection from unlawful imprisonment or punishment without a trial.
- 3. Ultimately, it demonstrated that the king was also subject to the law.
- D. The Pope renounced the Charter and excommunicated all those who had forced it upon the king.
 - 1. As a result, the English lords declared that the Pope had no say in political business.
 - 2. This would lead to religious conflict and oppression.
- E. 150 years later, John Wycliffe preached against the corruption and tyranny of the Catholic Church as he translated the Bible into Middle English.
 - 1. He is often referred to as the "morning star of the Reformation."
 - 2. He taught that Scripture was the supreme source of authority in religion, not the Pope.
 - 3. His work led to a rise in literacy and education in the land.
 - 4. His message along with the humor of Geoffrey Chaucer (in *The Canterbury Tales*) fomented an uprising in England.
 - 5. He died in 1384, was declared a heretic in 1415, then his body was exhumed and burned in 1428.
- F. As time went on, Christopher Columbus discovered America (1492), the Reformation Movement began in earnest (1517), and King Henry VIII formed the Church of England (1534).
- G. These events led to a cycle of persecution that caused many to seek a home in the New World that they might practice their faith freely.
- H. The Puritans established the Plymouth Colony in 1620 and the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629.

III. The Plan: Freedom of Religion

- A. The First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
- B. The First Amendment to the Constitution was adopted on December 15, 1791, along with the other nine that comprise the Bill of Rights.
- C. It declared that the government cannot establish or enforce any state religion.
- D. Furthermore, the government is prohibited from interfering with or stopping the free exercise of one's beliefs.
 - 1. The purpose was to keep government out of religion.
 - 2. It was not to keep religion out of the government.
- E. This is in harmony with God's design for human government (1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

Conclusion:

- 1. The First Amendment is first for a reason.
- 2. The first law given in the First Amendment is the Freedom of Religion.
- 3. This blessing and privilege should never be taken for granted.