

Minister to Freedom:
The Legacy of
John Witherspoon

by Joseph Loconte

Foreword by
Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.

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The March of Freedom by Edwin J. Feulner, Jr.

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Foreword

This year's President's Essay tells the story of John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, and a powerful though largely overlooked force in the birth of our nation. It was written by Joe Loconte, whose job title I will come to by way of a story that is very much to the point of his essay.

One weekend in November 1997 I was visiting with William E. Simon, who had been a Heritage Trustee, colleague, and personal friend for more than twenty years. As we talked, our conversation turned toward religion. This wasn't unusual, because Bill was a man of deep faith and a eucharistic minister. Hundreds of destitute, terminally ill patients died with their souls at peace because Bill Simon had been there to pray with them and comfort them in their final moments. As we chatted, I could see that this wasn't mere conversation. Bill had something weightier than usual on his mind. He had been giving serious thought to the state of religion in America. He saw an institution once vibrant and vital that had been gradually pushed out of the public square and onto the margins of our nation's civic life.

Bill saw a nation that was losing its soul, and he wanted to do something about it. He wondered aloud if it might be done through an endowed fellowship at The Heritage Foundation. The outlines of his idea were clear enough. The American Founders were men of faith who had made a place for religion as a central and essential pillar of a free society. The erosion and

displacement of that pillar over the years was not a self-correcting process. Serious people of faith must make serious efforts to correct it. Ever the businessman, Bill wanted to see a plan of action: Heritage is a think tank, so what did we think about that problem?

Well, we thought a lot about it. I soon wrote to Bill and suggested what seemed like an ideal statement of purpose for the fellowship he was contemplating. It was expressed in this passage from a speech by Michael Novak when he accepted the 1994 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion:

We must learn again how to teach the virtues of the noble Greeks and Romans, the commandments God entrusted to the Hebrews, and the virtues that Jesus introduced into the world—even into secular consciences—such as gentleness, kindness, compassion, and the equality of all in our Father’s love. We must celebrate again the heroes, great and humble, who have for centuries exemplified the virtues proper to our individual peoples. We must learn again how to speak of virtue, character, and nobility of soul. . . . We will have to learn, once again, how to think about such matters, and how to argue about them publicly, with civility, and also with the moral seriousness of those who know that the survival of liberty depends upon the outcome. The free society is moral, or not at all.

Those words rang true, so we worked out details for advancing those aims. A few months later Bill pledged an endowment gift to establish The Heritage Foundation’s William E. Simon Fellowship for Religion and a Free Society. As we cast about for our first Simon Fellow, Joe Loconte was a natural and easy choice. A trained journalist, Joe had already earned our respect as deputy editor of our flagship journal *Policy Review*. He is also a compelling public speaker and holds a master’s degree in Christian history and theology. And perhaps most important, he is a man of

faith whose work reflects his professional competence and personal commitment.

Joe's essay reprinted here is aptly titled "Minister to Freedom: The Legacy of John Witherspoon."¹ I would underscore the word "legacy." As America enters the 21st century and approaches its 225th birthday, we are a nation in need of rediscovering the sadly neglected legacy of our Founding Fathers. Our motivation to do so has been greatly, though cruelly, energized. As I write these lines, it is shortly after Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Following that terrible day of senseless destruction, Americans turned to religion in numbers unknown to living memory. Churches and synagogues were suddenly filled to overflowing, and public officials on our television screens spoke continually of God and faith.

Despite the horrific cause, a nation searching for comfort in religion is disposed to add momentum to what was already, in fact, a healthful trend toward rediscovering and reviving our roots as Americans. The past few years have brought a growing number of popular and scholarly books, magazine articles, movies, and television documentaries that explore various facets of the Founding Era.²

But there is more than one way to read history and extract its lessons, and some ways are better than others. On that point, the late Professor Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago drew a crucially important distinction in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*, which shows how the American university, once an island of intellectual freedom where ideas were freely and seriously investigated, has been cut adrift and driven into the shoals by gusts of public opinion, political correctness, and moral relativism:

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1. First published in *Building a Healthy Culture: Strategies for an American Renaissance*, ed. Don Eberly (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001).
 2. For a bibliography, see *The Founders' Almanac*, ed. Matthew Spalding (Washington, D.C.: The B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation, 2001).

There is an enormous difference between saying, as teachers once did, “You must learn to see the world as Homer or Shakespeare did,” and saying, as teachers now do, “Homer and Shakespeare had some of the same concerns you do and can enrich your vision of the world.” In the former approach students are challenged to discover new experiences and reassess old; in the latter, they are free to use the books in any way they please.

The latter approach found its full voice in the 1960s’ cry for “relevance,” which meant: Our present-day framework of beliefs, values, manners, and morals is just fine, thank you. We seek from history only those notions that fit into our framework.

Turn to current thinking about religion and you see the danger in that approach. We live at a time when, to cite one telling example, the highest court in the land interprets our Constitution to mean that students cannot hear a prayer at their high school graduation ceremony. No one who takes that framework as sound will discover much of value or “relevance” among the Founders’ views of religion. To recover their lost treasures we must stand in their shoes, look through their eyes, and learn to see the world as they saw it through their framework of beliefs, values, manners, and morals.

Michael Novak drove that point home brilliantly in a speech titled “Sacred Honor: Religious Principle in the American Founding,” which he gave at Heritage’s Annual Board Meeting at Philadelphia in April 2000.³ He related a series of stories that illustrate how radically the Founders’ views of religion differ

3. All speeches from that meeting are reprinted in *The Enduring Principles of the American Founding*, ed. Matthew Spalding (Washington, D.C.: The B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation: 2001). Michael Novak also contributed the 1989 President’s Essay, “Errand into the Wilderness,” which has been reprinted in *The March of Freedom* ed. Edwin J. Feulner, Jr. (Dallas, Tex.: Spence Publishing Company, 1998).

from today's thinking. For example, one story concerned an article in the Constitution of Massachusetts that required "towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic or religious societies to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God ... in all cases where such provisions shall not be made voluntarily." Novak then said:

When this article was attacked as an infringement on religious liberty, John Adams replied, in effect, "Not at all, you don't have to believe it. But if you want the good order that comes from instruction in religion, particularly the Jewish and Christian religion, then you have to pay for it." That's not the way we think today, I hastily add, but this is the sort of logic our Founders used.

Indeed, that is not the way we think today. If we are to bridge the chasm between contemporary views and the Founders' views, we must get inside *their* logic and understand the relation of church and state as *they* understood it. On that point, Novak and Bloom speak as one.

Approached in that way, this essay on John Witherspoon, and the excerpts of his original writings that follow it, provide an opportunity for you to leave the 21st century and return to America's Founding Era, walk alongside one of the most influential Founders, experience the world as he experienced it, and think about it as he thought about it. From that vantage point, and only from that vantage point, can we ever hope to identify and correct the drastic contemporary errors of thought that place barricades between religion and a free society.

That is what Bill Simon wanted to help accomplish when he talked with me on that weekend back in 1997. Bill died in June of 2000, but his faith and patriotism live on through the fellowship that bears his name and makes this year's President's Essay possible. It is with fondness and gratitude that I dedicate it to the memory of William E. Simon.



There are several individuals behind the scenes without whose help this publication would not be possible. I would first like to thank Gwen Penning at Eerdman's Publishing Company for assisting us in obtaining the permission to use Joe Loconte's essay from their book, *Building a Healthy Culture: Strategies for an American Renaissance*. I am also grateful to Dave Thomasson, who first suggested this essay to me and assisted me in the writing of the foreword. Michael Colombo, Thomas Timmons, Richard Odermatt, Michelle Fulton Smith, and Drew Bond have all helped in the production of this essay. Finally, sincere thanks to all of our friends who, with their numerous suggestions and encouragement, continue to make this annual publication possible.

Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.
President
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By Joseph Loconte

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Joseph Loconte

*“God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.”*¹

—John Witherspoon

On July 30, 1776, British troops, flush with bravado as they prepared to run George Washington’s ragtag army off of Long Island, burned the general in effigy. Alongside Washington they torched the figure of a minister, the Reverend John Witherspoon. One English officer denounced him as a “political firebrand, who perhaps had not a less share in the Revolution than Washington himself.”² That wasn’t just sour grapes. As much as any figure in the colonial era, Witherspoon embodied the potent alliance between faith and freedom that would radically distinguish America from her European cousins. Religious wars, after all, had bloodied the Continent

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1. “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men,” delivered at Princeton on May 17, 1776, from *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, edited by Thomas Miller (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 147.
 2. Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 133.

since the Reformation. In the years leading up to the French Revolution, the air was thick with anti-religious venom. “We will strangle the last king,” was the cry, “with the guts of the last priest.”

It was not so in America, and John Witherspoon’s career was part of the reason. As a member of the Continental Congress, he signed the Declaration of Independence—the only minister to do so—and lost a son in the Revolutionary War. As a leader of the American Presbyterian Church, he argued that robust religion depended not on government sponsorship, but on freedom of conscience. And as president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), he not only made the campus a “seminary of sedition,” but prepared a generation of men—including James Madison—for leadership roles in the new nation. John Adams called him “as high a son of liberty as any man in America.”³

The example of Witherspoon is especially important now, when many Americans seem deeply ambivalent about the role of religion in society. Yale law professor Stephen Carter bemoans a “culture of disbelief,” while activists agitate for a return to “Christian America.” Others seem ready to retreat altogether into enclaves of isolation. At a time when American society is perhaps most in need of widespread renewal, people of religious conviction seem ill-prepared to lead the way.

By contrast, Witherspoon offers people of faith a stiff tonic for civic and political engagement. A Presbyterian minister by training, he applied some of the best ideas of the Protestant tradition to each of the institutions in which he toiled—the church, the academy, and politics. His emphasis on human corruption and sin, for example, made him advocate a government with checks and balances on its power. Many religious leaders effused utopian social or political objectives, but Witherspoon made pru-

3. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1850–1856), vol. II, p. 356.

dence a judge over his own. While others thoughtlessly linked the Bible to contemporary issues, Witherspoon appealed to conscience and common sense, convinced that God had stamped his moral law on every man's heart. And in an age of declining attention to morals, he made character the touchstone of religious truth and the requisite for effective public service. Historian Garry Wills has called him "probably the most influential teacher in the entire history of American education."⁴

Preamble to Liberty

A native of Scotland, Witherspoon was born in 1723 to the Reverend James Witherspoon, a Presbyterian pastor, and Anne Walker, a minister's daughter. John was reading from the Bible by the time he was four and soon could recite large portions of the New Testament. He seemed destined for the pulpit. His career in politics, however, would have been much harder to predict. As pastor at Paisley Abbey in Scotland, he counseled against ministers getting entangled with public affairs. It was sinful and reckless for them, he said, "to desire or claim the direction of such matters as fall within the province of the civil magistrates." Witherspoon delivered that warning in a sermon in September 1758. Twenty years later he joined the American Continental Congress and would help ratify the U.S. Constitution.⁵

Witherspoon ministered at a time when Scottish Presbyterianism was in schism. Theological Moderates, with the help of British party politics, had gained advantage over the more conservative Popular Party, or Evangelicals. Active in the church's General Assembly, Witherspoon battled the more liberal wing for the right of congregations to control their own leadership.

4. Garry Wills, *Explaining America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783–1837* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 2.

5. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 55.

Witherspoon's prestige as a principled conciliator caught the attention of American Presbyterians, trying to quiet their own doctrinal squabbles. They needed a new president at the College of New Jersey, an incubator for Presbyterian ministers, and turned to Witherspoon. He eventually accepted the post and landed in Philadelphia harbor on August 7, 1768, with his wife and five children. When he arrived in Princeton, he found the college building, Nassau Hall, lit from top to bottom with candles to greet him. Few could have guessed that he would help set the campus ablaze with revolutionary fervor. Indeed, within a decade he would become "America's foremost academic propagandist for independence."⁶

Faith and Freedom

The immediate task before President Witherspoon was to restructure the college curriculum, and for the first several years of his tenure he was busily involved in administration, preaching, and teaching. He designed mandatory, extensive courses in rhetoric and moral philosophy. He purchased state-of-the-art scientific equipment, while greatly expanding the college's library. His grammar school soon became one of the best in the colonies.

Nevertheless, not even the studious halls at Princeton were soundproofed from the clamor of political dissent. By July 1774, Witherspoon had joined seventy-two representatives from the state to help elect New Jersey delegates to the First Continental Congress. In June 1775, shortly after fighting broke out at Lexington, Reverend Witherspoon drafted a letter for the Synod of New York and Philadelphia urging ministers to back the war effort. His recommendations, to be read to all congregations, "changed the role of the Presbyterian clergy from uncommitted observers to active supporters of the revolution."⁷ A year

6. James L. McAllister, "John Witherspoon: Academic Advocate for American Freedom," in *A Miscellany of American Christianity: Essays in Honor of H. Shelton Smith*, ed. Stuart C. Henry (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), p. 183.

later he was appointed as a representative to the Second Continental Congress and led the movement in New Jersey to depose the royal governor.

As a politically engaged minister, Witherspoon certainly was no oddity. As James Hutson, Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, notes, “it would be difficult to count the number of ministers who served in civil capacities during the revolutionary period.” Religious leaders could be found in state legislatures and constitutional conventions. Parson Peter Muhlenberg, after delivering a sermon to his congregation in Woodstock, Virginia, tossed off his clerical robes to reveal the uniform of an officer in the Virginia militia. Such was the climate on the eve of independence.⁸

Yet Witherspoon’s patriotic impulses had a somewhat different footing. In 1776, two months before the Declaration, he preached a sermon on the political crisis called “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men.” Its purpose was not so much to attach God’s blessing to the American cause, but to underscore the importance of religious conviction to both personal and public life. “Unless you are united to [Christ] by a lively faith,” he told his Princeton congregation, “not the resentment of a haughty monarch, but the sword of divine justice hangs over you.”⁹ While acknowledging the “singular interposition of Providence” in behalf of the colonies, the minister sternly warned against misplaced pride.

Finally, in language that was both plain and powerful, he joined political and religious freedom at the hip. “There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire,” he said. “If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.”¹⁰ The sermon perfectly captured the mood of

7. Thomas Miller, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 29.

8. James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1998), p. 46.

9. Miller, *Selected Writings*, pp. 137–38.

the colonies. Widely distributed, it carried the weight of one of the nation's most respected educators and clerics. William Warren Sweet, dean of American church historians, calls it "one of the most influential pulpit utterances during the whole course of the war."¹¹ The Scottish preacher had become an American patriot.

How Democracy Nourishes Religion

One of Witherspoon's major arguments for democratic government was that it ultimately would promote religious conviction. In "The Dominion of Providence," he cited historical precedent to insist that political freedom would aid religious freedom. "The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely, confined to those parts of the earth where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen."¹² This, however, would happen not on the European model—with a nationally established church—but mostly through indirect means.

Limited governments, Witherspoon said, allow for the greatest civic freedom. They make room for the political, commercial, and social relations that both require and nurture the virtues all citizens should desire. During a debate at Nassau Hall just months before signing the Declaration of Independence, he explained the "essential benefit" of liberty:

its tendency to put in motion and encourage the exertion of all the human powers. It must therefore evidently improve the human mind, and bring with it, in highest perfection, all the advantages of the social state. It is the parent or the nurse of industry, opulence, knowledge, virtue, and heroism.¹³

10. Miller, *Selected Writings*, pp. 140–41.

11. William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765–1840* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), p. 8.

12. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 140.

Witherspoon joined a growing number of religious leaders who argued that religion would not be secure until it was officially separated from the state. The lesson from Europe was clear enough: Established churches always trampled the consciences of religious minorities. The best help the state could give religion, then, was to refrain from imposing any faith on its citizens. “The greatest service which magistrates or persons in authority can do with respect to the religion or morals of the people,” Witherspoon said, “is to defend and secure the rights of conscience in the most equal and impartial manner.”¹⁴ Though he never expected government to be neutral about religion or irreligion, he cleanly rejected the idea that any church, even his own American Presbyterian Church, should receive privileged legal status. If the state were to aid religion, it must do so even-handedly.

In his “Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica,” he assured prospective students—many, no doubt, belonging to minority faiths—that he was “a passionate admirer of the equal and impartial support of every religious denomination.”¹⁵ When the Presbyterians reorganized after the war under the General Assembly, Witherspoon drafted the preface to their statement on religious liberty:

Therefore they consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and inalienable: *they do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and*

13. “Dialogue on Civil Liberty,” delivered at a Public Exhibition in Nassau Hall, January 1776, reprinted in *Pennsylvania Magazine*, April 1776, p. 167.

14. “Pastoral Letter,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802), 3:14, quoted in John G. West Jr.’s *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1996), p. 28.

15. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 114.

security, and, at the same time, be equal and common to all others.¹⁶ (emphasis added)

The American Presbyterian Church, while adopting the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1729, had departed from the confession on this very point: Civil magistrates would have no authority over church affairs, not even in the suppression of heresies. Thus, Witherspoon was not an innovator in this regard, but his formulation—asserting a universal right of conscience, while rejecting special government support for churches—foreshadowed the two clauses of the First Amendment (penned several years later by former student James Madison). Witherspoon’s preface remains the official position of American Presbyterianism to this day.

How Religion Sustains Democracy

Witherspoon’s commitment to freedom of conscience comports with his view of religion as a leavening influence in society. That is, as people gain the civic and political freedom to practice their faith, they will live lives of exemplary citizenship. As scholar John West notes, Witherspoon agreed with skeptic Benjamin Franklin that this was one of the obligations of religious communities. Churches “are well secured in their religious liberty,” Witherspoon said. “The return which is expected from them to the community, is . . . [that] their people may be the more regular citizens, and the more useful members of society.”¹⁷

Before unpacking this view, however, it is vital to appreciate the minister’s understanding of human nature. He firmly upheld traditional Protestant beliefs about the corrupting influence of sin, both on individuals and on society. In his college *Lectures*

16. Quoted by James Hastings Nichols in “John Witherspoon on Church and State,” in *Calvinism and the Political Order*, ed. George L. Hunt (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), p. 133.

17. John Witherspoon, “[Sermon] Delivered at a Publick Thanksgiving,” *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 3:81, quoted in John G. West Jr., *The Politics of Revelation and Reason*, p. 27.

on *Moral Philosophy*, he gets quickly to the point: “The whole revelation of the will of God to mankind, both in the Old Testament and the New, proceeds upon the supposition that they are sinners.” Even in one of Witherspoon’s most political sermons—at the outbreak of hostilities with Britain—he feels obliged to insist that “nothing can be more absolutely necessary to true religion, than a clear conviction of the sinfulness of our nature and state.”¹⁸

The religious doctrine of man’s sinfulness, however, is often mistaken for a despising of human life and human striving. Yet there is a corollary to human sin: the God-given dignity of every person. Because men and women continue to bear the image of the creator, the pursuit of virtue is still possible. “But as the scripture points out our original dignity and the true glory of our nature,” Witherspoon said, “so every true penitent is there taught to aspire after the noblest character and to entertain the most exalted hopes.”¹⁹

From this biblical dualism flow several political implications. First, any government that fails to reckon with the reality of sin and vice—as the natural drift of every human being—is doomed to collapse. This is critical for the health of democracies, which maintain order not through authoritarian rule but by the self-regulating behavior of their citizens. “Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction,” he said. “A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual, and slavery must ensue.”²⁰ Consequently, political leaders have an interest in promoting virtue whenever possible.

Second, the problem of sin requires not only that government be limited (because of the temptation to abuse power), but that

18. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 128.

19. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 117.

20. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 144.

it also be balanced by competing institutions. “It is folly to expect that a state should be upheld by integrity in all who have a share in managing it,” he said. “They must be so balanced, that when every one draws to his own interest or inclination, there may be an even poise upon the whole.”²¹ To be sure, Witherspoon drew from Scottish Whiggism and John Locke’s republicanism to argue for independent branches of government. But his understanding of man’s essential selfishness undergirded his own theory of a separation of powers—and almost certainly influenced those of his student, Madison, the main architect of the U.S. Constitution.

Third, the doctrine of original sin makes the democratic impulse plausible, because all stand under the judgment of God. A just government is one that recognizes, especially in its legal system, this essential equality of all persons. “The magistrate with his robes, the scholar with his learning, and the day laborer that stands unnoticed are all upon the same footing,” Witherspoon concluded, “for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.”²²

The practical conclusion: A self-governing republic demands self-governing citizens. Self-governing citizens need “republican” virtues that are hardly sustainable without religion. But real religion must be uncoerced, meaning government may not impose one of its own. Thus: freedom requires virtue, which requires faith, which requires freedom. This forms the heart of Witherspoon’s argument for “the public interest of religion.” Whatever their actual convictions, virtually all the Founders publicly praised the social utility of religion. Even Franklin once chided Thomas Paine for dismissing religious belief: “He who spits in the wind spits in his own face. . . . If men are wicked with religion, what would they be without it?”

21. Quoted by James H. Smylie, “Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought,” in *Ideas in America’s Cultures*, ed. Hamilton Cravens (Ames: Iowa State University Press 1982), p. 123.

22. Quoted in “Christian Magnanimity,” in Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 125.

As historian Paul Johnson puts it, the Founders agreed that education was essential to a functioning republic, and who else would supply moral education but the churches? The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was unambiguous: “Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, Schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”²³ Nevertheless, few argued as strenuously as Witherspoon for an indissoluble link between faith and social stability. “He is the best friend of American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion,” he said, “and who sets himself with the greatest firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind.”²⁴

“True religion” for Witherspoon, a Protestant minister, naturally meant Christianity. Yet his arguments were devoid of any denominational bias, respecting the religious pluralism that already existed in the colonies. Thus, three times Congress turned to the minister to help author national religious proclamations. In the national Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of 1782, he called the sincere practice of religion “the great foundation” of public prosperity and national happiness.²⁵ He concluded his most famous political sermon, “The Dominion of Providence,” with this appeal: “God grant in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.”²⁶

The Politics of Persuasion

One of the most striking features of Witherspoon’s approach to civic life was the way he grappled with the leading political and

23. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 208–9.

24. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 144.

25. Matthew F. Rose, *John Witherspoon: An American Leader* (Washington, D.C.: The Family Research Council, 1999), p. 85.

26. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 147.

philosophical challenges of his era. As he himself admitted, his “chief comfort” was teaching the Christian gospel and training men for religious duties. Nevertheless, in his roles as educator and politician, he called for direct engagement with the public issues of the day—from philosophical skepticism to the federalist debates of the 1780s. For him, the faithful citizen bore an obligation not merely to proclaim, but to persuade: to use all the intellectual tools available to win over one’s adversaries. “Military skill and political wisdom have their admirers,” he told his students, “but far inferior in number to those who admire, envy, or would wish to imitate him that has the power of persuasion.”

Essential to persuasion is the discipline of rhetoric. Witherspoon launched the most extensive program of oratorical study in revolutionary America. He reinstated student philosophical societies squelched by a previous administration. Students gathered nearly every night for speeches and debates in the main college building, Nassau Hall. Witherspoon himself delivered commencement addresses heavy with political themes. “The purpose of combining classroom instruction with extensive public practice was to prepare students to speak to the practical problems of public life,” concludes historian Thomas Miller.²⁷

And speak they did. Witherspoon and his students delivered orations on free trade, civil discord, the rights of women, immigration policy, and the horrors of war. In contemporary culture, in which so much of our political rhetoric seems impoverished, it is easy to overlook the importance of public debate in revolutionary America. Rhetoric was a political art of no mean influence, especially as Americans began to embrace a national political state. Witherspoon clearly understood the importance of the discipline, calling it “one of the most admired and envied talents.”

27. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 21.

In his opening address in *Lectures on Eloquence*, he warned his students not to dismiss the practice of rhetoric either for social reasons (evil men abuse it) or religious reasons (it may lead to pride). Along the way he delivered a stinging rebuke against anti-intellectualism:

Learning in general possessed by a bad man is unspeakably pernicious, and that very thing has sometimes made weak people speak against learning; but it is just as absurd . . . [to say] we will use no arms for defense, for if the enemy take them from us, they will be turned against us.²⁸

The warning would appear often in his lectures. Witherspoon seemed especially mindful of the unfortunate impulse to elevate “spiritual” knowledge while neglecting tough intellectual labor. The result, he feared, would be to damage the public reputation of Christianity. “We see sometimes the pride of unsanctified knowledge do great injury to religion,” he said. “On the other hand, we find some persons of real piety, despising human learning, and disgracing the most glorious truths, by a meanness and indecency hardly sufferable in their manner of handling them.”²⁹

A Common Sense Philosophy

The intellectual foundation for Witherspoon was Common Sense Philosophy, or Scottish Realism, an attempt to use natural reason to support the claims of religion. It was a philosophy developed by Thomas Reid at the University of Glasgow, who argued that religious truths were consistent with “common sense” and “self-evident axioms.” Witherspoon borrowed heavily from the Scottish Realists for his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*—a required course for every Princeton graduate—to challenge the Deism of his day and articulate a system of social and political ethics.

28. Miller, *Selected Writings*, pp. 231–32.

29. Quoted in Collins, *President Witherspoon*, vol. 2, p. 198.

Several themes emerge from the minister's application of these ideas to education and political life, all of which offer important lessons for contemporary religious and political leaders:

Reason and Revelation

First, Witherspoon united reason and revelation. As an evangelical Protestant, he considered Scripture the ultimate source of truth and moral authority. It was not, however, the only source: Scripture itself taught that God made man as a rational, purposeful being. Man is certainly more than a thinking creature, but he is not less. To bear God's image, even as fallen man, is to possess the capacity to think and discover truths apart from an understanding of Scripture; for God has built his truths into the fabric of the natural world. "If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter."³⁰

Consider how he exhorted his students to cultivate self-restraint in his lecture on "Christian Magnanimity":

The importance and difficulty of this struggle appear not only from the Holy Scriptures, but also from the experience and testimony of mankind in every age. What cautions are given by Solomon upon this subject? "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city." *The wisest heathens have inculcated the necessity of self government* and the dangers of surrounding temptation by many instructive images.³¹

It is true, he said, that those who scoff at religion misuse argument for their own ends. But that's no reason to abandon reason. "The best way is to meet them upon their own ground and to show from reason itself the fallacy of their principles."³² Or,

30. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 152.

31. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 121 (emphasis added).

32. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 152.

as author C. S. Lewis once put it, “good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason than that bad philosophy needs to be answered.” At the same time, reason had its limits. Witherspoon attacked the Deists for believing reason was a sufficient guide to life and right living. On this he never budged: Reason could never by itself produce a repentant heart or saving faith; it must always be tested by the claims of revealed religion.

Yet one of the fruits of recognizing a legitimate role for reason was that it helped Witherspoon show charity toward those with whom he disagreed. If the Scriptures were not the only source of wisdom, then other thinkers—even Enlightenment figures—could be studied and appreciated. He exposed his students to Shakespeare, Pope, Swift, and Locke. Though he called Hume “an infidel in opinion,” Witherspoon admitted that he possessed “great reach and accuracy of judgment in matters of criticism.”³³ Another benefit of reason was that it made conversation—and debate—possible between believers and skeptics. If reason was indeed a universal faculty, then there was no need to constantly invoke the Bible to make philosophical or political arguments. “This is not the language of religion only,” he warned in a sermon against self-seeking ambition. “It is the language of reason and the dictate of the human heart.”³⁴

The Appeal to Moral Instincts

Second, Witherspoon appealed to people’s moral instincts. He followed Francis Hutcheson and other eighteenth-century philosophers who equated the moral sense with what the Bible calls “conscience.” Our understanding of good and evil, Witherspoon said, was as much a part of our nature as our love of beauty. He regarded it as man’s noblest attribute, but never divorced it from the Divine will. “It is the law which our Maker

33. Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Columbia University, Teachers College Press, 1971), p.133..

34. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 120.

has written upon our hearts, and both intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning.”³⁵

In this Witherspoon again avoided two extremes: those to his theological left who glibly imagined human nature ripening inexorably to perfection; and those to his right, who saw little possibility of virtue among free men. “It pleased God to write his law upon the heart of man at first,” he told his Glasgow congregation in 1759. “And the great lines of duty, *however obscured by our original apostasy, are still visible*, as to afford an opportunity of judging, what conduct and practice is, or is not agreeable to its dictates.”³⁶

Confidence in the dictates of conscience would buttress Witherspoon’s teaching and political activity for the next forty years. Indeed, the purpose of political philosophy was to spell out societal norms consistent with basic moral convictions—ideas not only about natural rights but moral obligations. The job of the legislator was to craft civil laws based on the moral law wherever practical. “Political law,” he said, “is the authority of any society stamped on moral duty.”³⁷ As historian Roger Fechner describes it, for Witherspoon, “duties and rights were the exact moral counterparts of each other.”³⁸

Much of his public engagement would reflect that relationship. Politics involves the art of persuasion, of course, and for Witherspoon persuasion carried intellectual and moral freight. His persuasive power depended not on the force of his personality

35. John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy and Eloquence* (Philadelphia, 1810), pp. 12–13, quoted in “The Influence of Princeton on Higher Education in the South Before 1825,” by Donald Robert Come, *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. II (1945): 364.

36. John Witherspoon, “The Trial of Religious Truth by Its Moral Influence,” Sermon 38, in *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 4 vols., 2:391.

37. Quoted in McAllister, “John Witherspoon: Academic Advocate for American Freedom,” p. 198.

38. Roger J. Fechner, “The Godly and Virtuous Republic of John Witherspoon,” in *Ideas in America’s Cultures*, ed. Hamilton Cravens, p. 16.

—he never was considered a charismatic speaker—but on the logic of his arguments, upheld largely by an appeal to people’s moral instincts.

In November 1779, for example, Congress was debating whether it should recommend a plan for fixing the prices of labor, manufactured goods, and imports. Witherspoon vigorously opposed the plan, not only because it was impractical but because it coerced private businessmen. If prices seemed unreasonably high, “this will fix of itself by the consent of the buyer and seller better than it can be done by any politician upon earth.” Lawmakers, he insisted, must “carefully distinguish between what is effected by force and what by persuasion, and never preposterously mix these opposite principles and defeat the operation of both.”³⁹

Though not wholly consistent, Witherspoon employed a morally grounded—though not necessarily moralizing—approach to politics that today is in short supply.

The Discipline of Prudence

Third, Witherspoon practiced the discipline of prudence. Moral principles are fine, but in politics they must be carefully applied to achieve the desired ends. Reason, common sense, a knowledge of history, a sense of the current moment—Witherspoon used all these tools to arrive at arguments that were both principled and prudent.

At the outbreak of hostilities with Britain, in his first political sermon in America, it is noteworthy what Witherspoon did not do: He did not invoke America as the “New Israel,” desperate to break free from the Egyptian-like grip of Great Britain. Recall that clergymen at this time were virtuosi in finding biblical analogues to current political events; they painted the war with England as a cosmic struggle between good and evil.⁴⁰ Not Witherspoon. “I do not refuse submission to their unjust claims

39. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 24.

40. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding*, p. 42.

because they are corrupt,” he insisted. The real problem was that Britain—separated from America by an ocean—had no right, or ability, to restrict the freedoms of Americans. “A wise and prudent administration of our affairs is as impossible as the claim of authority is unjust.”⁴¹

In the debate over the Articles of Confederation, he tangled with his friend Benjamin Franklin, who objected to the document because he thought a confederacy based on equal votes would not last long. Witherspoon countered that the fate of Sparta and the Roman provinces suggested that weaker states inevitably succumb to the more powerful. More importantly, Witherspoon said, it was imperative that the union be agreed to now, when all the states faced a common enemy; otherwise, as the conflict deepened, they easily could lose heart. If agreement could not be reached now, he argued, “what madness is it to suppose that there will ever be a time, or that circumstances will so change, as to make it even probable that it will be done at an after season?”⁴²

By sensing the importance of the political moment, he argued effectively for appropriate political action—especially when inaction could prove fatal. “Shall we establish nothing good, because it cannot be eternal? Shall we live without government because every constitution has its old age and its period?” He implored the other Founders instead to exercise their best judgments: “It only requires the more watchful attention to settle government upon the best principles and in the wisest manner that it may last as long as the nature of things will admit.”⁴³ In other words, do the best you can, and don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

41. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 141.

42. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 9.

43. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 9.

The Academy as Incubator

If politics was the most important crucible for Witherspoon's public philosophy, the academy was its cradle, which in eighteenth-century America was still tightly bound to religion. Virtually all the early colleges and universities were founded as religious schools; nearly half the signers of the Declaration had seminary degrees or training. Outside the church, Witherspoon could hardly imagine a more important institution for forging the souls of young men—or the future of a young nation.

“The importance of the presidents in giving shape to the influence which the college exercised cannot be overestimated,” asserts historian Donald Robert Come.⁴⁴ Part of the reason was the direct involvement that presidents had in the lives of their students. Witherspoon taught them grammar, history, geography, moral philosophy, and divinity. He set up student philosophic societies and approved most of the public speeches they delivered. He knew personally the family of nearly every boy under his charge.

Witherspoon served as president of the College of New Jersey from 1768 to 1794, and they proved to be twenty-five years of immense change. As a professor of divinity, he lectured candidates for the ministry, one of the major aims of the college at its founding. Yet even before he arrived, the school was giving less attention than Harvard to religious and classical studies, and more to moral philosophy. It was still considered a “public seminary of learning,”⁴⁵ but under Witherspoon that mission would be greatly transformed.

Indeed, as tensions with Britain heightened, he would help turn the campus into what English detractors called “a seminary of sedition.” One British officer complained that the president “poisons the minds of his young Students and through them the

44. Donald Robert Come, “The Influence of Princeton on Higher Education in the South Before 1825,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. II (1945): 362.

45. Quoted in Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 20.

Continent.”⁴⁶ That’s a bit overheated, but it’s clear the campus became a center of revolutionary fervor and a refuge for freedom fighters. By 1770, students angrily burned a letter from New York merchants who ignored the Non-Importation Agreement. Four years later, they staged their own “tea party” after patriots in Boston led the way. That same year the entire student body burned in effigy the reviled British sympathizer, Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts. There is no evidence the president, an otherwise rigid disciplinarian, offered a whisper of protest. Meanwhile, at every commencement seniors waxed eloquent on liberty and the rights of free men.⁴⁷

As the political crisis deepened, there was mounting pressure for leaders who could write and speak for public debate. The cultural landscape was shifting: A new social leader was required, a well-educated political leader who could speak to the issues of the day. Witherspoon understood the moment. He groomed his students to address the most important political audiences imaginable—signers of the Declaration of Independence, future U.S. presidents, Supreme Court justices, delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

The Faithful Statesman

There are few better expressions of the religious ideal of the citizen-statesman than Witherspoon’s sermon “Christian Magnanimity.” First delivered at commencement in 1775, it would be repeated every year for a decade, and later made mandatory reading by successor Ashbel Green. Witherspoon sought to show that, contrary to critics who dismissed Christian virtue as lacking nobility, real greatness was inseparable from sincere piety. This is because only genuine faith can keep the heart set on right ambitions. “The object of our desires must be just as

46. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 133.

47. Francis L. Broderick, “Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746–1794,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. VI (1949), p. 64.

well as great,” he warned. “Some of the noblest powers of the human mind have often been exerted in invading the right instead of promoting the interest and happiness of mankind.”⁴⁸

Promotion of the common good was an important theme for Witherspoon. Only a small number of men would ever be called into the ministry; the vast majority would take up occupations outside the church. All the more important, he reasoned, to “fit young Gentlemen for serving their Country in public Stations.”⁴⁹ Their public influence would come from within their chosen professions, depending on the sincerity of their faith, the constancy of their character, and the wise application of their God-given talents:

In a public view, every good man is called to live and act for the glory of God and the good of others. Here he has as extensive a scene of activity as he can possibly desire. He is not indeed permitted to glory or to build an altar to his own vanity, but he is both permitted and obliged to exert his talents, to improve his time, to employ his substance and to hazard his life in his Maker’s service or his country’s cause. Nor am I able to conceive any character more truly great than that of one, whatever be his station or profession, who is devoted to the public good under immediate order of Providence.⁵⁰

If Witherspoon’s frequent encouragement from the lectern failed to fling his students into public service, his personal example would do the job. “In 1740 America’s leading intellectuals were clergymen and thought about theology,” writes historian Edmunds Morgan. “In 1790 they were statesmen and thought about politics.”⁵¹ Witherspoon somehow managed to think about both. His mailing list included the likes of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, Benjamin Rush,

48. “Christian Magnanimity,” in Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 120.

49. Quoted in Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 21.

50. “Christian Magnanimity,” in Miller, *Selected Writings*, pp. 121–22.

and George Washington. While holding his post at Princeton, he shuttled back and forth to Philadelphia to serve as a member of the Continental Congress. He personally delivered assistance to General Washington and his troops in New Jersey and argued vigorously for support of the army. President Woodrow Wilson, another Princeton man, once remarked that “it was as if Washington himself spoke in council for the things which Washington in the field needed, when John Witherspoon stood upon his feet in the Continental Congress.”⁵²

Witherspoon spent more time practicing rhetoric than teaching it. When other delegates wanted to delay passage of the Declaration of Independence because it seemed the colonies were not “ripe” for independence, he argued that they were “not only ripe for the measure but in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it.” As a delegate to the Continental Congress (1776–1782), he served on no fewer than 126 committees. He signed the Articles of Confederation, helped ratify the federal Constitution, and helped pass three of the first four organic laws of the United States.

Ultimately, it seems, Witherspoon’s vision of the engaged citizen of faith was contagious. During his tenure at Princeton, the proportion of students who pursued professions outside the church steadily increased. Prior to his arrival, nearly 50 percent of all graduates went into the ministry; only half that many would do during his administration.⁵³ The political crisis surely had much to do with this. Nevertheless, Witherspoon helped

51. Edmunds Morgan, “The American Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement,” in *Paths of American Thought*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 11–33.

52. Quoted in Teresa O. de Prevost, *John Witherspoon: George Washington’s Close Friend and Sponsor* (1932 pamphlet), p. 21. (She reports that Wilson delivered these remarks at dedication ceremonies for the Witherspoon statue in Washington, D.C.)

53. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 222.

shift the mission of the college from training ministers to preparing men for leadership—in politics, education, and law.

The result was that this evangelical minister presided over the foremost school for statesmen in the new American republic.⁵⁴ Among his graduates were one U.S. president (James Madison, B.A., 1771); a vice president (Aaron Burr, B.A., 1772); twelve members of the Continental Congress; five delegates to the Constitutional Convention; forty-nine U.S. representatives; twenty-eight U.S. senators; three Supreme Court justices; eight U.S. district judges; one secretary of state; three attorneys general; and two foreign ministers. Another twenty-six served as state judges, seventeen as members of their state conventions that ratified the proposed Constitution. Though Witherspoon's own political career was considerable, his greatest influence in public life was mediated through his students.⁵⁵ In this sense, he became a pivotal figure in America's transition from clerical to political leadership.

The Demands of Leadership

Though Witherspoon was strenuously involved in public affairs, he repeatedly emphasized the private side—the person of character and faith. What force is it, he once asked, that carries the greatest influence over the opinions of men? It is the power of example. “What is it that first begins, establishes, or perpetuates their influence? Nothing else, but the real or apparent sanctity of their character.”⁵⁶ Reason and argument are important, he said, “but example seizes and keeps possession of the heart.”⁵⁷

54. McAllister, “John Witherspoon: Academic Advocate for American Freedom,” p. 193.

55. Jeffrey Hays Morrison, “John Witherspoon and ‘The Public Interest of Religion,’” *Journal of Church and State* 41, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 553.

56. John Witherspoon, “The Trial of Religious Truth by Its Moral Influence,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 2:397.

57. Witherspoon, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 2:398.

As a pastor and teacher of divinity, Witherspoon vigorously defended the importance of correct doctrine. Yet he did not do so as an academic or intellectual exercise. For Witherspoon, faith that failed to produce a moral life was, quite simply, no faith at all: “Moral influence is the proper touchstone and trial of religious truth.” Conversely, there were few things more damaging to the public witness of faith than religious charlatans—those who “assume the form, while they are strangers to the power of it.”⁵⁸ Unlike many of his religious contemporaries, he stressed the inner transformation of heart and mind produced by faith. “The leading principle of true holiness, according to the gospel, is a deep and grateful sense of redeeming love.”⁵⁹

Surely this helps explain how Witherspoon, never a lax disciplinarian, elicited genuine affection from his students. James Madison called him “the good doctor.” John Chavis, a former slave sent to Princeton as “an experiment,” became famous as a schoolmaster and preacher in North Carolina.⁶⁰ Ashbel Green, another graduate, who later served as president of the college, remarked: “To Dr. Witherspoon more than to any other human being, I am indebted for whatever of influence or success has attended me in life.”⁶¹

Such influence cannot be separated from Witherspoon’s own example. As historian Roger Fechner concludes: “He persuaded his listeners by the accuracy of his learning and the force of his personal piety.”⁶² Yet it was more than piety that commended Witherspoon to his generation; it was moral courage. In May of 1776 he argued that “when liberty, prosperity, and life are at stake, we must not think of being scholars but soldiers.” At

58. Witherspoon, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 2:395.

59. Witherspoon, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 2:406.

60. Collins, *President Witherspoon*, p. 217.

61. Joseph H. Jones, *The Life of Ashbel Green* (New York: R. Carter and Bros., 1849), p. 146; also quoted in Come, “The Influence of Princeton on Higher Education in the South Before 1825,” p. 365.

62. Fechner, “The Godly and Virtuous Republic,” p. 10.

fifty-four, Witherspoon was too old to be much of a soldier, but he was a son of liberty. In July he signed the Declaration of Independence, pledging with his compatriots “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

By November the vow was put to the test. Witherspoon was forced to cut the term short, dismiss the college, and flee with his wife and family for their lives. Washington and his battered army marched through Princeton on December 2. Within a week a brigade of British troops arrived, quartered themselves in the empty college building, and staged the battle of Princeton. Witherspoon would return to the college within a few months to carry on his duties—academic and political.

Even in his *Lectures on Eloquence* he drove home the connection between private virtue and public action: “There can be no doubt that integrity is the first and most important character of a man. . . . This integrity should show itself in undertaking causes.”⁶³ And undertake them he did. In addition to his contribution to the cause for American independence, he launched numerous humanitarian efforts—securing better treatment for prisoners, improving military hospitals, arranging for the printing and distribution of Bibles.

Here is a vision for cultural influence that avoids the excesses of much of our contemporary debates about religion and politics. Witherspoon embodied the man of faith as citizen-statesman. He repeatedly warned his listeners of the need for personal piety and exemplary character; yet he never eluded the call to public action. A favorite text from the gospels—“let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven”—precluded for him the life of a cloistered cleric. He would reject not only religious triumphalism in politics, but pseudo-spiritual withdrawal from culture.

Writing on the eve of Independence, John Adams feared that “we have not Men, fit for the Times.” Those men would appear, thanks in no small measure to the preacher-cum-politician.

63. Miller, *Selected Writings*, p. 301.

Combatants in today's culture wars could learn much from this forgotten son of liberty.

Addendum 1

Part of a Speech in Congress, Upon the Confederation⁶⁴

In June 1776, Witherspoon joined legislators in Philadelphia to debate the need for a stronger union. The immediate result was the Articles of Confederation, the first written constitution of the United States, approved in 1781. It proved to be woefully inadequate, however, and was replaced by our current Constitution, ratified in 1788.

The absolute necessity of union to the vigor and success of those measures on which we are already entered is felt and confessed by every one of us without exception; so far, indeed, that those who have expressed their fears or suspicions of the existing confederacy proving abortive have yet agreed in saying that there must and shall be a confederacy for the purposes of and till the finishing of this war. So far it is well, and so far it is pleasing to hear them express their sentiments. But I entreat gentlemen calmly to consider how far the giving up all hopes of a lasting confederacy among these states for their future security and improvement will have an effect upon the stability and efficacy of even the temporary confederacy....

64. "Part of a Speech in Congress, Upon the Confederation," taken from *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp.148–151.

If therefore at present, when the danger is yet imminent, when it is so far from being over that it is but coming to its height, we shall find it impossible to agree upon the terms of this confederacy; what madness is it to suppose that there ever will be a time, or that circumstances will so change as to make it even probable that it will be done at an after season? Will not the very same difficulties that are in our way be in the way of those who shall come after us? Is it possible that they should be ignorant of them, or inattentive to them? Will they not have the same jealousies of each other, the same attachment to local prejudices and particular interests? So certain is this that I look upon it as on the repentance of a sinner—every day's delay, though it adds to the necessity, yet augments the difficulty and takes from the inclination.

There is one thing that has been thrown out by which some seem to persuade themselves of and others to be more indifferent about the success of a confederacy—that from the nature of men, it is to be expected that a time must come when it will be dissolved and broken in pieces. I am none of those who either deny or conceal the depravity of human nature, till it is purified by the light of truth and renewed by the Spirit of the living God. Yet I apprehend there is not force in the reasoning at all. Shall we establish nothing good because we know it cannot be eternal? Shall we live without government because every constitution has its old age and its period? Because we know that we shall die, shall we take no pains to preserve or lengthen our life? Far from it, sir: it only requires the more watchful attention to settle government upon the best principles and in the wisest manner that it may last as long as the nature of things will admit...

For all these reasons, sir, I humbly apprehend that every argument from honor, interest, safety, and necessity conspire in pressing us to a confederacy; and if it be seriously attempted, I hope by the blessing of God upon our endeavors, it will be happily accomplished....

Addendum 2

The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men⁶⁵

*Preached at Princeton on May 17, 1776,
Witherspoon's sermon on the link between
civil and religious liberty quickly became
one of the most influential addresses of the Revolutionary era.
Less than two months later, the Scottish minister
would join the Continental Congress and
sign the Declaration of Independence.*

You are all my witnesses that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation that the cause in which America is now in arms is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature. So far as we have hitherto proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy of the colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue.

65. "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men," taken from *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp.126–147.

The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely, confined to those parts of the earth where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen; and great were the difficulties with which they had to struggle from the imperfection of human society and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage....

1. Suffer me to recommend to you an attention to the public interest of religion, or in other words, zeal for the glory of God and the good of others. I have already endeavored to exhort sinners to repentance; what I have here in view is to point out to you the concern which every good man ought to take in the national character and manners, and the means which he ought to use for promoting public virtue; and bearing down impiety and vice. This is a matter of the utmost moment, and which ought to be well understood, both in its nature and principles.

Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction. A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual, and slavery must ensue. On the other hand, when the manners of a nation are pure, when true religion and internal principles maintain their vigour, the attempts of the most powerful enemies to oppress them are commonly baffled and disappointed....

What follows from this? That he is the best friend to American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion, and who sets himself with the greatest firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind.... Do not suppose, my brethren, that I mean to recommend a furious and angry zeal for the circumstantial of religion, or the contentions of one sect with another about their peculiar dis-

tinctions. I do not wish you to oppose anybody's religion, but everybody's wickedness....

2. I exhort all who are not called to go into the field [of war] to apply themselves with the utmost diligence to works of industry. It is in your power by this means not only to supply the necessities, but to add to the strength of your country. Habits of industry prevailing in a society not only increase its wealth as their immediate effect, but they prevent the introduction of many vices and are intimately connected with sobriety and good morals. Idleness is the mother or nurse of almost every vice; and want, which is its inseparable companion, urges men on to the most abandoned and destructive courses.

Industry, therefore, is a moral duty of the greatest moment, absolutely necessary to national prosperity, and the sure way of obtaining the blessing of God.... Industry brings up a firm and hardy race. He who is inured to the labor of the field is prepared for the fatigues of a campaign. The active farmer who rises with the dawn and follows his team or plow must in the end be an overmatch for those effeminate and delicate soldiers who are nursed in the lap of self-indulgence and whose greatest exertion is in the important preparation for and tedious attendance on a masquerade or midnight ball....

Upon the whole, I beseech you to make a wise improvement of the present threatening aspect of public affairs, and to remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves is the same. True religion is nothing else but an inward temper and outward conduct suited to your state and circumstances in providence at any time. And as peace with God and conformity to him adds to the sweetness of created comforts while we possess them, so in times of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principle that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.

Addendum 3

Fast Day Proclamation of the Continental Congress, December 11, 1776⁶⁶

*During the stormy days of the American Revolution,
it was not uncommon for the Continental Congress
to call for national days of prayer and fasting.
Three times the Congress turned to the Rev. John Witherspoon
to draft an appropriate proclamation.*

Whereas, the war in which the United States are engaged with Great Britain, has not only been prolonged, but is likely to be carried to the greatest extremity; and whereas, it becomes all public bodies, as well as private persons, to reverence the Providence of God, and look up to him as the supreme disposer of all events, and the arbiter of the fate of nations; therefore,

Resolved, That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance as assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.

66. "Fast Day Proclamation of the Continental Congress, December 11, 1776," *The Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, Gaillard Hunt, et al. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904–37), Vol. 6, p. 1022.

The Congress do also, in the most earnest manner, recommend to all the members of the United States, and particularly the officers of civil and military under them, the exercise of repentance and reformation; and further, require of them the strict observation of the articles of war, and particularly, that part of the said articles, which forbids profane swearing, and all immorality, of which all such officers are desired to take notice.

It is left to each State to issue out proclamations fixing the days that appear most proper within their several bounds.