

Founders, Faith, and the American Experiment

What the Founders actually believed about Jesus — why his name is absent from the Bill of Rights — and how Manifest Destiny turned providence into policy.

A primary-source study • By Shane Gunn

WHY THIS STUDY MATTERS

American Christians inherit two stories at once: a religious story (the Bible, the church, the gospel of Jesus Christ) and a civic story (the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights). Those stories are often blurred. Popular history sometimes baptises the Founders as Evangelicals; popular secularism sometimes demotes them all to atheists. Neither is true. The evidence in their own letters, diaries, and autobiographies tells a more careful, more interesting, and more *useful* story for disciples.

This study works from the primary sources. Where the evidence is clear, we will say so. Where it is mixed, we will say so. And we will ask the question a church has to ask: **what is the relationship between the kingdom of Jesus Christ and the nation in which we happen to live?**

“The Founders” were not a theological bloc. They ranged from orthodox Trinitarian Christians to rationalist deists who rejected Christ’s divinity.

Orthodox / Confessional Christians — John Witherspoon (Presbyterian minister, President of Princeton, signer of the Declaration), John Jay (Anglican, first Chief Justice, later president of the American Bible Society), Roger Sherman (Calvinist, the only man to sign all four founding documents), Samuel Adams (Congregationalist, the “Father of the American Revolution”), Patrick Henry (Anglican), Elias Boudinot (Congregationalist, founded the American Bible Society, 1816).

Low-Church / Heterodox Christians — George Washington (Anglican by practice, extremely private about doctrine), John Adams (Congregationalist turned Unitarian, rejected the Trinity and eternal damnation), John Quincy Adams (more orthodox than his father).

Enlightenment Deists / Rational Religionists — Benjamin Franklin (raised Presbyterian, became a moral deist who doubted Christ’s divinity), Thomas Jefferson (raised Anglican, became a Unitarian-leaning rationalist who cut the miracles out of his New Testament), James Madison (studied under Witherspoon; private beliefs opaque; public writings strictly rationalist on church-state).

Radical Deists — Thomas Paine (openly hostile to institutional Christianity in *The Age of Reason*), Ethan Allen (*Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, 1784).

Note what this spectrum does *not* contain: almost no atheists. Nearly every Founder believed in God, providence, and moral accountability. The disagreement was about *Jesus*: was he God incarnate and risen Savior, or a supremely wise moral teacher?

Anglican / Reserved

George Washington (1732–1799)

Washington was a vestryman of Truro Parish and filled his public writings with references to “Providence,” “the Almighty Being,” and “the Great Ruler of Nations.” He rarely wrote the name “Jesus Christ” in private correspondence. Bishop William White of Philadelphia and Rev. James Abercrombie both testified that Washington did not kneel for or receive communion, habitually leaving before the Lord’s Supper. Abercrombie wrote bluntly: “Sir, Washington was a Deist.” Historians remain divided; the fairest summary is that Washington was a conventionally observant Anglican whose inner convictions about the person of Christ he deliberately kept private.

“The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.”

— **First Inaugural Address, 30 April 1789**

Moral Deist

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Franklin’s *Autobiography* recounts that he was raised Presbyterian but “soon became a thorough Deist” as a young man, writing a notorious 1725 pamphlet denying divine justice (later suppressed). By 1728 he composed his own private liturgy, *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion*. He believed in one providential God and moral accountability — but not in the orthodox doctrine of Christ’s divinity. Six weeks before his death he wrote the most honest single paragraph any Founder left on the subject, to Ezra Stiles, president of Yale:

“As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.”

— **Franklin to Ezra Stiles, 9 March 1790**

That is not a Christian confession. It is a respectful deist demurrer. Yet at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, it was Franklin who rose and asked the delegates to begin each session with prayer — citing “that God governs in the affairs of men.”

Unitarian

John Adams (1735–1826)

Adams was raised Congregationalist and drifted into Unitarianism. He rejected the Trinity, substitutionary atonement, and eternal damnation — and said so in letters to Jefferson. At the same time, he took the ethics of Jesus with enormous seriousness.

“The Philosophy of Jesus is at the Bottom of my Ethics and my Religion.”

— Adams to Jefferson, 4 November 1816

His much-quoted line — “This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it” — is routinely ripped out of context; he was lamenting religious fanaticism, not confessing atheism.

Rationalist / Editor of Jesus

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Jefferson revered Jesus as the greatest moral teacher in history and denied his divinity with equal conviction. In 1804 and again in 1819–20 he took a razor to the New Testament and physically cut out every verse he judged to be Christ’s authentic moral teaching, pasting them into a book now called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, or “the Jefferson Bible.” The miracles, the resurrection, every claim to divinity — all excised.

“I am a Christian, in the only sense he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; & believing he never claimed any other.”

— Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 21 April 1803

“The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.”

— Jefferson to John Adams, 11 April 1823

Architect of the Religion Clauses

James Madison (1751–1836)

Madison studied under John Witherspoon at Princeton; by maturity his surviving writings are strictly rationalist on church-state matters. He drafted the First Amendment. His 1785 *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* — an anonymous petition against Patrick Henry’s proposed Virginia tax to support Christian teachers — is one of the sharpest arguments for religious liberty ever penned by an American.

“The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate... This right is in its nature an unalienable right.”

— Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance*, 1785

Radical Deist

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) fired the Revolution; his *Age of Reason* (1794–1807) fired nearly every American pulpit against him. Of all the Founders he is the most openly hostile to Christianity, denying revelation, miracles, and the authority of the Bible.

“I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.”

— Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part I, 1794

Orthodox

Witherspoon, Jay, Sherman, Samuel Adams

Against the deists stand figures whose Christian orthodoxy is not in dispute. **Witherspoon** was an ordained Presbyterian minister who taught half the founding generation at Princeton. **Jay**, first Chief Justice, wrote: “It is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers” (to John Murray, 12 October 1816) — a view most of his colleagues would not have endorsed. **Sherman** wrote a confession of faith for his Connecticut church and signed all four founding documents. **Samuel Adams** called for public days of humiliation and prayer as Governor of Massachusetts. The Constitution’s religious restraint was a deliberate compromise among men of very different convictions.

PART 3 – WHAT IS DEISM?

Deism is the Enlightenment’s attempt to keep God while discarding revelation. Its classic form was set out by Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, in *De Veritate* (1624), with five “common notions” any rational person could derive from nature:

1. There is one supreme God.
2. God ought to be worshipped.
3. Virtue and piety are the chief parts of worship.
4. Sins ought to be repented of.
5. There is reward and punishment in this life and the next.

Later deists pressed further: **John Toland** (*Christianity Not Mysterious*, 1696), **Matthew Tindal** (*Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 1730), and **Thomas Paine**, who attacked the Bible directly. A working summary of American deism as the Founders practised it:

- **God is the rational Creator** who established the universe and its natural laws.
- **Providence is real** — but typically works through natural means, not miracles.
- **Revelation is suspect.** The Bible contains moral wisdom but is a human document; its miracles are doubtful.
- **Jesus is a teacher, not a Savior.** His moral teaching is the purest in history; his divinity is denied or privately doubted.
- **Religion reduces to morality.** True piety is a virtuous life, not right doctrine.

Theologically: Deism is not a variety of Christianity; it is a rival to it. It keeps the word “God” but removes the scandal of the Incarnation (John 1:14), the atonement (Rom 5:8), and the bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:14) — the very facts without which, Paul says, our faith is in vain.

Greek NT (1 Cor 15:14): εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς οὐκ ἐγήγερται, κενὸν ἔσται τὸ κήρυγμα ἡμῶν, κενὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν.

1 Corinthians 15:14 (ESV): “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.”

PART 4 — WHY JESUS IS NOT IN THE BILL OF RIGHTS

The Constitution (1787) mentions God only once, in its dating line: “in the Year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty seven” — the standard dating convention of the period. The Bill of Rights (1791) does not mention God at all. Jesus Christ is nowhere in either document. This is not an oversight; it is a deliberate settlement. Six things produced it.

1. The memory of European religious war. The Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) had killed a third of the population of the German lands in the name of Christian doctrine. The English Civil War (1642–1651) had executed a king over church government.

2. The colonial experience. Nine of the thirteen colonies had established churches at some point. Baptists had been jailed, Quakers hanged in Boston (Mary Dyer, 1660), Catholics disenfranchised.

3. Article VI, Clause 3 — no religious test. “No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

4. The Baptist alliance. Isaac Backus in New England and John Leland in Virginia were among the fiercest advocates of disestablishment, not because they were lukewarm about Christ but because they had been *jailed* by established Christians. Leland met with Madison in 1788 and agreed to support ratification of the Constitution in exchange for a promised Bill of Rights protecting religious liberty. The First Amendment is, in part, a Baptist political victory.

5. Jefferson’s “wall of separation.” On 1 January 1802, Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association of “a wall of separation between Church & State.” The Supreme Court cited this in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), and it has governed Establishment Clause jurisprudence ever since.

6. The Treaty of Tripoli (1797). Under President John Adams, the Senate unanimously ratified Article 11: “As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...”

To name Jesus in the Bill of Rights would have privileged one religion against others and bound the conscience of the citizen to a doctrinal confession. They did not omit Christ because they did not believe in him (many of them did); they omitted him because they did not want *the state* to speak for him.

Theological language about *providence* came to sanctify *territorial expansion*.

The coining. Journalist **John L. O’Sullivan**, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, July–August 1845: “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

Older roots:

- **John Winthrop, 1630.** “A Model of Christian Charity”: the Puritan colony as a new covenant community — “we shall be as a city upon a hill” (echoing Matt 5:14).
- **Jefferson’s “empire of liberty.”** The 1803 Louisiana Purchase doubled U.S. territory.
- **The chosen-people motif.** Preachers read America as a new Israel — a reading that quietly cast Native peoples as Canaanites.

The policy that followed:

- **Indian Removal Act (1830); Trail of Tears (1838–39)** — some 16,000 Cherokee forced west, with roughly 4,000 dying on the route.
- **Texas annexation (1845), Oregon Treaty (1846), Mexican-American War (1846–48), Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** ceding roughly half of Mexico’s national territory.
- **Gadsden Purchase (1854); later, Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis (1893).**

Christian critics at the time:

- **Abraham Lincoln**, then a freshman congressman, filed the “Spot Resolutions” (1847) demanding President Polk identify the exact spot on American soil where the Mexican War had begun.
- **Henry David Thoreau** refused his poll tax, producing “Civil Disobedience” (1849).
- **Frederick Douglass**, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker denounced the war as a slaveholder’s expansion dressed in providential clothing.

The late echo. In 1898, Senator **Albert J. Beveridge** re-cast Manifest Destiny as a duty of empire: “God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing... He has made us the master organizers of the world.”

The New Testament treats nations with sober realism — capable of good, capable of idolatry, always tempted to confuse themselves with the kingdom of God.

Greek NT (John 6:15): Ἰησοῦς οὖν γινούσ' ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἄρπάξαι αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα, ἀνεχώρησεν πάλιν εἰς τὸ ὄρος αὐτὸ ἑξ ἑαυτοῦ.

John 6:15 (ESV): “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Greek NT (Phil 3:20): ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει, ἐξ οὗ καὶ σωτῆρα ἀπεκδεχόμεθα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν.

Philippians 3:20 (ESV): “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

LXX (Ps 2:1–2): ἵνα τί ἐφρούραξαν ἔθνη καὶ λαοὶ ἐμελέτησαν κενά; παρέστησαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς... κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ.

Psalms 2:1–2 (ESV): “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves... against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

What this history gives us, as disciples, is a set of disciplines:

- **Honesty.** We do not need the Founders to have been Evangelicals to love our country, and we do not need them to have been atheists to honor the gospel.
- **Humility about civil religion.** Manifest Destiny read scripture as a warrant for conquest; the New Testament reads conquest as a temptation Christ refused (Matt 4:8–10).
- **Gratitude for disestablishment.** A church that cannot be taxed to preach by the state is also a church that cannot be *silenced* by the state.
- **Allegiance ordered rightly.** Love of country belongs inside love of Christ, not over it. The nation is a neighbor we love; it is not a Lord we worship.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, King above every nation, we thank you for the country we live in and the liberties we have been given. Forgive us for the times we have confused our flag with your cross, or our history with your kingdom. Teach us to love America without worshipping her, to tell her story truthfully, and to remember those she has wounded. Make us Baptists about establishment and Christians about conscience — quick to honor Caesar where Caesar is right, and quicker still to obey you when Caesar is wrong. Our citizenship is in heaven; from there we wait for you, our Savior and Lord. Amen.