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Adoption of the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was formally adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. The document “eloquently expressed the colonies’ reasons for rejecting British rule” (Rakove) and was subsequently signed by fifty-six representatives from the thirteen North American British colonies that separated from Great Britain. This significant event greatly impacted the development of the United States and later was celebrated annually as Independence Day or the Fourth of July, “the greatest secular holiday of the United States” (“Independence Day”). Many people acknowledge that Christianity influenced the process that led to the Declaration of Independence, though this view is not shared by all. To gain a better understanding of the Declaration, one must know the events and issues that gradually led to its adoption.

The writing of the Declaration of Independence culminated a ten-year period where relations between Great Britain and her thirteen American colonies became increasingly strained. At the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War in 1763, Britain had accumulated an “enormous postwar debt” and needed to “finance the administration of its newly acquired lands.” “The British expected the American colonies, which prospered during the Seven Years’ War [. . .], to assume at least part of the financial burden” (Soifer and Hoffman 41). However, “with the passage of time many of the colonists began to think of themselves not as transplanted Britons, but as ‘Americans’” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 122) emerging as a nation (125). Parliament provoked intense protest from the colonies when attempting to raise taxes from them in the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767, and the Tea Act of 1773 (Rakove). “The colonial struggle for power” actually stemmed from an “argument over legal interpretation.” “The core of the colonial case was that, as British subjects, they were entitled to the same privileges as their fellow subjects in Britain. They could not constitutionally be taxed without their own consent; and, because they were unrepresented in the Parliament that voted the taxes, they had not given this consent [to be taxed]” (“United States”). The colonists opposed taxes in any form without representation in Parliament, and they rejected Prime Minister George Grenville’s argument that they had “virtual representation” since “every member of Parliament represented all British subjects” including those in America (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 127). To protest the first two Acts, the colonists peacefully resisted and boycotted, but in response to the Tea Act they destroyed British property in the Boston Tea Party in December of 1773. Parliament responded in 1774 with the Coercive Acts, a series of punitive measures against America, and Massachusetts in particular, that angered the colonists who named them the Intolerable Acts.

In response to the Intolerable Acts, the First Continental Congress was summoned in late 1774, and fifty-five distinguished men from twelve of the thirteen colonies convened to “plan common measures of resistance” (Rakove) and to redress “their grievances by appealing not to Parliament but to the Crown and the British people” (Soifer and Hoffman 47). The delegates hoped that “King George III and his ministers would free the colonies from the Intolerable Acts” (Rakove) and that a second meeting in May 1775 would not be necessary. However, “the petitions of the Continental Congress were rejected, after considerable debate, by strong majorities in Parliament” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 134). In retrospect, “Mistakes were made by the British authorities,

but they were not, until revolt had erupted, mistakes of malice” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 124).

In an effort to avoid a civil war before King George III could respond to Congress’s appeals, Congress urged the people of Massachusetts to remain “peaceably and firmly [. . .] on the defensive,” being certain that the British fire first in the event of any conflict (Maier, *American Scripture* 3-4). On April 19, 1775, British General Gage was commanded to arrest radical leaders, such as Samuel Adams and John Hancock, and put down any open rebellion in the colonies (Soifer and Hoffman 48). “At Lexington the colonial ‘Minute Men’ refused to disperse rapidly enough, and shots were fired that killed eight Americans and wounded several more” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 134). Maier documents that the colonists viewed the British as “firing on a company of townsmen that had already begun to disperse,” and the redcoats again fired first at Concord (*American Scripture* 8). Maier aptly states, “Not even the outbreak of war at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775, ended the Americans’ desire to remain under the British Crown. Delegates to the Second Continental Congress, which convened at Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, worked, as their constituents insisted, for reconciliation with the mother country and ardently denied charges that the Americans wanted to found a ‘new empire’ until January 1776, when suddenly, with the arrival of still more news that demonstrated the king’s hostility toward America, the denials ceased” (Introduction 4). The Second Continental Congress adopted the “Olive Branch Petition in July 1775, “professing American Loyalty to the crown and begging the king to prevent further hostilities. But following [the American capture of Ticonderoga and the battle of] Bunker Hill [where the king lost about 1,000 soldiers], King George III slammed the door on all hope of reconciliation” and ignored their petition and “formally proclaimed the colonies in rebellion” in August 1775. In the following month, the king hired thousands of German troops to help fight against the Americans, thus shocking the colonists and increasing their grievances (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 144).

Throughout most of the ten-year crisis period prior to the Declaration of Independence, the Americans blamed Parliament and the king’s ministers for the problems between them and Great Britain instead of blaming the king. “In time, though, a dramatic change in attitude toward George III transformed the American Revolution into a war for independence” (Soifer and Hoffman 51). Snell notes, “Like most revolutionary movements, the American Revolution was directed by about one-third of the population.” Another third were Loyalists who opposed the war and remained “loyal to the English crown,” and another third were neutral (49).

Independence was resisted for several reasons. As a negative motivator, the fear of powerful Britain restrained the colonists from an open rebellion that could be dangerous. As a positive motivator, Maier comments in *American Scripture* that “Americans took pride in being governed under Britain’s unwritten constitution, which they considered the most perfect form of government ever invented,” and thus “everywhere reverence for the inherited institutions of British government inhibited the movement toward separate nationhood. Throughout their conflict with Britain, colonists had rarely questioned the British system of government, but directed their suspicions toward particular men within it” (29-30). Furthermore, “Loyalty to the empire was deeply ingrained; colonial unity was poor” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 145). American officers were still toasting to the king’s health at dinners even “five months before independence was declared” (145). However, Americans were gradually noticing their inconsistency of professing loyalty to a king who was fighting against them with the aid of treacherous foreigners, Indians, and slaves. Additionally, the king had burned American buildings in Falmouth and Norfolk.

As a springboard from this inconsistency, in January 1776, Thomas Paine started publishing the influential pamphlet *Common Sense* that proclaimed it absurd that “the tiny island of England

should control the vast continent of America” and “argued for the superiority of a republic over a monarchy.” The pamphlet “called not simply for independence, but for the creation of a new kind of political society, a democratic *republic*, where power flowed from the people themselves, not from a corrupt and despotic monarch. In language laced with biblical imagery familiar to common folk, he argued that all government officials [. . .] should derive their authority from popular consent” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 145-46). Maier summarizes an argument from the pamphlet, “the time had come to correct the ‘errors’ in Britain’s constitution and to found new governments free of kings and hereditary rule, governments in which all officials owed their power to popular choice” (Introduction 4). The pamphlet was mass produced and provided the stimulus needed by most Americans to move toward independence, and in the next few months “the colonial legislatures were replaced with new state governments that approved a final break with Great Britain” (Soifer and Hoffman 51).

According to Maier, between April and July of 1776, “early ‘declarations of independence’ [of towns, counties, and states] used Paine’s words, but seldom if ever did they repeat his central argument. In one case after another they founded their conclusion not on the flaws in Britain’s form of government, but on the way the king had treated Americans over the previous year” (Introduction 4-5). Maier lists that state and local “declarations of Independence” brought an end to the old state government, “authorized states’ Congressional delegates to approve [and work for] Independence,” “proclaimed a state’s commitment to separate nationhood and almost always summarized the events that had provoked and justified that position” (*American Scripture* 48-49). With the king exercising his sovereignty by forceful means, “a crisis was at hand: the colonists would be destroyed unless they got help from some non-British ally, which they could not do unless they bid Great Britain ‘the last adieu.’” “Maier concludes from her perspective, “The decision for independence was born, in short, not of desire but of desperation” (Introduction 5). “It was necessary to assert independence in order to secure as much French aid as possible” (“Declaration of Independence”). The local declarations eventually culminated in the Congressional writing of the Declaration of Independence that “marked an important turning point in the reason for fighting. This impressive document was to tell why the Americans were fighting and [would help] gain foreign sympathy and support” that was needed if the Americans were going to win their independence from Britain (Snell 49).

Starting with North Carolina, several states soon directed its delegates in Congress to declare for independence. On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, upon the authorization of the Virginia convention, introduced a motion to Congress, “That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved” (qtd. in Maier, Introduction 5-6). While all agreed that “independence had become inevitable,” heated discussion of Lee’s resolution proceeded on the 8th and 10th of June with opponents arguing that “negotiations with France should begin first and, moreover, that the people were not yet ready for independence, and that the Congress had always wisely avoided taking so major a step until ‘the voice of the people drove us into it’” (6). To give more time to the delegates to secure support for independence from states that were reluctant toward the move, the “delegates decided to postpone the decision until July” (6).

“In the meantime, to prevent further loss of time once a decision was made, on June 11, Congress appointed a committee to draft a declaration that could be issued if Congress adopted independence” (Maier, Introduction 6). The committee was made up of five members: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston. “The committee appointed Jefferson to realize its ideas on paper” (7). According to Soifer and Hoffman,

“Jefferson drew heavily on the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, particularly John Locke’s contract theory of government” (52). According to Maier, Jefferson’s first draft “underwent extensive revision [by the committee] before being submitted to Congress on June 28” (Introduction 12). Congress temporarily set aside the draft until after all the states except New York gave their consent to approve Lee’s resolution on July 2nd, 1776. “The passing of Lee’s resolution was the formal ‘declaration’ of independence by the American colonies, and technically this was all that was needed to cut the British tie.... But something more was required.... An inspirational appeal was also needed to enlist other English colonies in the Americas, to invite assistance from foreign nations, and to rally resistance at home” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 147). Over the next three days, the delegates edited the draft Declaration, making “more substantial changes, deleting a condemnation of the British people” (“Declaration of Independence”), and editing charges against the king. “Above all, however, Congress cut Jefferson’s long, overwrought passage [attacking slavery and] pinning responsibility for the slave trade on the king” (Maier, Introduction 14) “at the insistence of South Carolina, Georgia and some of the representatives from the northern states” (Soifer and Hoffman 52).

The final draft of the Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress on July 4, 1776 and signed by John Hancock, President of the Congress. Fifteen days later on July 19, New York’s delegation obtained permission to endorse the resolution for independence. Thus Congress resolved “that the Declaration passed on the 4th, be fairly engrossed [written in stylish script] on parchment, with the title and stile of ‘The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America,’ and that the same when engrossed, be signed by every member of Congress” (qtd. in Maier, *American Scripture* 151). The formal signing of the Declaration of Independence took place on August 2nd by those members present. Others who were absent signed at a later date, and the last of the fifty-six members from the thirteen states signed the document soon after 1777.

For conceptual clarity, Rakove divides the Declaration of Independence into four main sections. First, “The Preamble” section declares that those separating from the mother country should explain their reasons. Second, “A Declaration of Rights” section declares three main ideas about government: All men are created equal by God and given the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; governments exist to protect these rights; if a government tries to withhold these rights, the people can and should change or remove such a government. Third, “A Bill of Indictment” section gives a long list of grievances the colonists had against the king, which included taxation without representation, his use of Indians to attack colonists, denial of civil liberties, and many other perceived abuses. Fourth, “A Statement of Independence” section declared that the Continental Congress had repeatedly appealed for the king to correct the abuses, but they were ignored; and thus they felt that their only remaining option was to declare the colonies independent of Britain.

The adoption of the Declaration of Independence greatly impacted the development of the newly born nation in multiple ways. “When the Declaration was passed, the ageless tyranny of despotic rule was, at one blow, formally denounced and broken” (Wilson 15). “Racing horsemen and the noise of cannon fire carried the news far and wide. General Washington had the document read to the army and its ringing sentences strengthened the morale of his troops” (“The Declaration of Independence”). For colonists that were somewhat reluctant toward independence, the Declaration helped convince them to join the cause. It also helped to unite the members of the Continental Congress who committed their “lives, fortunes and [their] sacred honor” to each other and to the cause of independence by signing their name to the document, which could become their death warrant if the Revolution failed (“United States Declaration of

Independence”). The formal declaration of independence clearly established the colonies as a separate governing nation from Britain, thus giving the Americans a greater probability for success in requesting support from other nations concerning the war. The Declaration, coupled with the diplomatic efforts of Benjamin Franklin, encouraged France to support America in their war for independence. At first France secretly furnished aid to the Americans in 1776, but after a decisive American win at Saratoga in 1777, France finally declared war on Britain in June 1778. French troops assisted American troops in the south, culminating in the successful siege of Yorktown, where Cornwallis’s forces surrendered on Oct. 19, 1781, bringing an end to the war on land. Wilson insightfully notes, “By their action, the men who signed the Declaration, for the first time in history, made revolution an instrument that could be used by honorable men for a just cause” (15).

The Declaration contains three basic ideas in the “Declaration of Rights” section that “formed the groundwork for the state governments that were established after the Declaration was adopted” (“The Declaration of Independence”). Among these ideas, Rakove describes two universal principles in the Declaration that have helped democracies develop: “The first principle is that governments exist for the benefit of the people and not their rulers, and that when a government turns to tyranny (unjust use of power), the people of that country have a right to resist and overturn the government. The second principle, that ‘all men are created equal,’ has served as a powerful reminder that all members of a society are entitled to the full protection of the law and to the right to participate in public affairs” (Rakove). Wilson astutely writes that “This represented the first time in history that these principles were being put into action, as the basis for founding a new government and a new nation. [. . .] Man vaulted to an entirely new level of political life, and a kind of freedom that before had been only a matter of philosophical discussion [. . .]” (13).

According to Maier, “During the first fifteen years following its adoption, then, the Declaration of Independence seems to have been all but forgotten, particularly within the United States, except as the means by which Americans announced their separation from Great Britain” (*American Scripture* 168-69), “but the Declaration of Independence underwent a massive redefinition and rise in importance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Introduction 46). After the Bill of Rights was ratified, the Declaration of Independence rose from obscurity “since neither the federal Constitution nor the Bill of Rights said anything about men being born (or created) equal or having inalienable (or unalienable) rights,” and yet many people believed in these ideas and thus they “had to cite the Declaration of Independence” (Introduction 41). After the War of 1812, “a new generation of Americans looked back to the Revolution with awe” and began to regard the Founding Fathers as “supermen” and their writings as sacred. The Declaration became useful in helping those “who felt that their equality or rights were being violated” including workers, women, farmers, and slaves (42).

Women and especially slaves were eventually liberated as a result of emphasizing the principle of equality and inalienable rights in the Declaration. In 1848, the feminist movement began from a Woman’s Rights Convention of about 100 women in Seneca Falls, New York, where “the defiant [Elizabeth] Stanton read a ‘Declaration of Sentiments,’ which in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence declared that ‘all men *and women* are created equal”” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 340). In the 1850s the Republican Party “took on the defense of the Declaration and its principles, which gradually assumed an entirely new function—not as a revolutionary manifesto, but as a statement of principles to guide an established government, like a bill of rights.” Abraham Lincoln was an able spokesman for the party which regarded the “provision on equality” as a sacred

principle (Maier, Introduction 43). Lincoln in his first debate with Stephen Douglas in 1858 argued that “all men are created equal,” and thus “there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to those rights as the white man” (qtd. in Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 431). Lincoln argued in a speech given in 1857 that the founders realized that equality did not yet exist among all races and that they “could not right all wrongs at once” so Lincoln explained that what the founders meant to do was “simply to declare the *right* so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit” (qtd. in Maier, Introduction 44). While not everyone agreed with this interpretation, Republicans were able to take a step forward in implementing these ideas after the Union had won the Civil War in 1865. This was done by writing principles of the Declaration into the Constitution in the form of three amendments: the 13th made slavery forbidden; the 14th made ex-slaves citizens and guaranteed that all citizens would have equal protection of the law; the 15th made black males voters.

The Declaration began to inspire American independence from Britain in ways other than politically, such as religiously, economically, culturally, and intellectually. Noll states that religious practice changed: “European assumptions about how religion should function were largely set aside; revivalism as promoted [earlier in the Great Awakening] by George Whitefield provided new norms for ecclesiastical practice” (59). Economically, the U.S. became less dependent on goods produced by Britain. While Britain and the U.S. both used the English Language, in 1828 Noah Webster published the first American reference work, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, which “did declare the independence of American usage.” Webster insisted on using American spellings [. . .] and writing definitions taken from American life” (Soifer and Hoffman 122). Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a magnificent appeal at Harvard College in 1837 for an “intellectual Declaration of Independence, for it urged American writers to throw off European traditions and delve into the riches of their own backyards” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 349).

Reflecting on the present, the adoption of the Declaration of Independence has positively affected the identity of the nation today. The United States of America celebrates on the fourth day of every July the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and its implications of freedom that were wrought for generations to come. The document “remains a great historical landmark in that it contained the first formal assertion by a whole people of their right to a government of their own choice. [. . .] Since 1952 the original parchment document of the Declaration of Independence has resided in the National Archives exhibition hall in Washington D.C.” along with the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights (“Declaration of Independence”). The U.S. Declaration “has been a source of inspiration to countless revolutionary movements against arbitrary authority” (Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen 148), and thus has made the U.S. an example to the world. President Abraham Lincoln’s views of the Declaration, especially his emphasis that “all men are created equal”, have elevated the Declaration of Independence to being a living force in today’s society that encourages people to reach towards the document’s idealistic principles over time. The 14th and 15th amendments, derived from the principles of the Declaration, were used by the Supreme Court in the twentieth century “to make states respect the Bill of Rights” in such cases as freedom of speech and opposing racial segregation. The Declaration’s principles ring loudly as companies, governments, and society strive to treat people with respect and equality regardless of their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

There are some connections with the adoption of the Declaration of Independence to the place of Christianity in America today. The principles of the Declaration have not only increased

equality among races and sexes in society; they have also increased this equality in the church. The church and its theology are sometimes influenced by and reflect the culture that surrounds it. As a result, many Christians in colonial days could defend slavery and the subordination of women to lesser roles in church-life via the Scriptures. Over the years, the principle in the Declaration that “all men are created equal” has elevated the status and privileges of women and non-whites within America which has had a dramatic effect upon the church and its theology. Practically all churches now acknowledge that slavery and racism are wrong according to the Scriptures, and many churches have elevated the value of women in family life, in the public arena, and even in church life. Some churches now encourage women to occupy and function in the same positions as men, in accordance with their view of the Scriptures. These changes in Christianity can be attributed, at least partially, to the prevailing nature of the principles that were adopted in the Declaration of Independence.

There are numerous connections with Christianity in the place of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. With the exception of religious groups such as the Anabaptists, Quakers, Mennonites, and Moravians who were “Conscientious Objectors” to the Revolution (Sweet 185-86), most of the churches and pastors in the colonial period supported the move toward independence and were among the first to proclaim this idea. In America, only the Anglican Church had ties to Great Britain, and the revival of the Great Awakening in the mid 1700s weakened these ties as many of its nominal members joined evangelical churches (Sweet 172). Themes of spiritual liberty, promoted by the revivalism preaching of George Whitefield, were paralleled by later appeals for political liberty (Noll 57). Whitefield did not read his sermons as many others would do, “But his form of public [spontaneous extemporaneous] speaking, and the implicit message of his ministry concerning leadership, constituted a powerful stimulus to a more democratic life (Noll, Hatch, and Marsden 55). “The religious temper of America was one of the prime causes of the Revolution,” (Sweet 173) and many New England ministers “exerted their influence to raise volunteers” and supported the cause with their preaching, writing, money, and service (178). Moreover, Noll states, “leading clergy of the most visible denominations—especially Congregationalists and Presbyterians—favored the patriot cause” (58). Ministers preached sermons that compared Pharaoh with King George III since his heart hardened to the pleas and petitions of the colonists (Marshall and Manuel 303), and later they preached sermons that compared Moses with George Washington, the leader of the army and hopeful deliverer (324). Ministers also preached “the doctrines of civil liberty as taught by Sidney, Locke, and Milton” and that God delegates power to rulers indirectly through the people (Sweet 177). Sweet writes, “in America at the end of the colonial era there was a larger degree of religious liberty than was to be found among most of the people of the world, and possession of religious liberty naturally leads to a demand for political liberty” (173). Christian historian Vos acknowledges that “the churches so generally supported the Revolution” that their houses of worship incurred the wrath of the British, especially those used for “barracks, hospitals and storage of military equipment” (137). Throughout the nation, more than fifty churches were destroyed and many others were systematically abused or damaged (Marshall and Manuel 301). According to Beliles and McDowell, “Christian character and principles were the foundation of the actions of the colonists which led to the American Revolution” (147).

It can be argued that Christianity influenced the writers and the writings of the Declaration of Independence. From an opposing perspective, according to Noll, Hatch, and Marsden, “the Revolutionary period marks a low point in public spiritual life in the country [and . . .] was marked by declining concern for church, weakness in evangelism, and general spiritual lassitude” (65), and only fifteen to twenty percent of Americans were “church members” (150). Noll, Hatch, and

Marsden claim that “only a few [of the founders] believed in the orthodox teachings of traditional Christianity—that, for example Christ’s death atoned for sin, that the Bible was a unique revelation from God, or that miracles recorded in Scripture actually happened” (72). However, according to Beliles and McDowell, “a great majority” of America’s founders were Christians, and “almost every one had a Biblical world-view, even the non-Christians” (vii). LaHaye concurs that “most were deeply religious, all had a great respect for the Christian traditions of the colonies, and all were significantly influenced in their thinking by the Bible, moral values, and their church” (30). Walker notes “the source of authority most often cited by the founding fathers was the Bible, which accounted for thirty-four percent of all their citations” with Deuteronomy being the most cited book “because of its emphasis on the law” (215). Amos boldly claims that the opinion that “all of the founders were deists who consciously rejected the Bible and Christian principles” is simply a myth. Instead, “They believed that God answered prayer. And they believed that He took an active part in the everyday affairs of men” (11). Although Jefferson may not be considered an orthodox Christian and did not accept the concept of the Trinity, Eidsmoe states that Jefferson did believe in “God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe” (224, 228). Analyzing quotes from Jefferson’s many diverse writings, Millard makes a case that “Jefferson had a great interest in the Bible and Christianity; [...] Although there is no evidence of his having had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, [...] Jefferson had a Christian value-system and world view, based upon principles taken from the Word of God itself” (*The Rewriting of America’s History* 108-09). Jefferson often used the writings of John Locke, who “was indeed a Christian who was Trinitarian in doctrine and who believed in the divinity of Christ” (Amos 20). The Declaration was the cumulative efforts of Jefferson, his committee members, and the members of the Second Continental Congress, all of whom were influenced by Christianity, and thus their writings reflected this influence.

It can be argued that many of the words that were used in the Declaration were influenced by Christianity. From an opposing perspective, Noll, Hatch, and Marsden view the “principles of the American revolution” as “basically secular” (20) and the “political ideals of American history” as “naturalistic” (23). Furthermore, “The founding fathers may have read the Bible, but explicit references to Scripture or Christian principles are conspicuously absent in the political discussions of the nation’s early history” (81). On the contrary, from his broad research, Amos affirms “that every key term in the Declaration of Independence had its roots in the Bible, Christian theology, the Western Christian intellectual tradition, medieval Christianity, Christian political theory, and the Christian influence on the six-hundred-year development of the English common law” (3). Furthermore, Amos states, “the ideas in the Declaration are Christian despite the fact that some of the men who wrote them down were not (20). According to Marshall and Manuel, as the primary composer, Jefferson borrowed “heavily from the phraseology of popular sermons of the day” (307). Jefferson’s original work underwent revisions by the committee and the Congress that included references to the Lord and dependence upon Him. Millard states, “At the heart of the document was the acknowledgement of God Himself—basing their rights to become an independent nation upon the ‘laws of nature and of nature’s God,’ enumerating the rights of man ‘endowed upon them by their Creator ... appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world’ and relying on the ‘protection of Divine Providence’” (“Overview of the States”). “Thus we see the Continental Congress declaring to all the world their Christian convictions” (Beliles and McDowell 149). DeMar describes the Declaration as a religious and theistic document, though “not specifically a Christian document. Even so, the religious phrases found in the body of the Declaration were easily understood in terms of the prevailing Christian worldview of the time” (114). Eidsmoe gives several instances of Biblical principles that appear in the Declaration. For example, the Biblical principles that “God is not one to

show partiality” (NASB, Acts 10:34) and that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (NASB, Gal. 3:28) and that equal justice is implied in the Old Testament Law (Exod. 23:6) all find expression in the Declaration’s words, “all men are created equal” (364). Furthermore, Biblical principles are found in Locke’s writing about God-given rights of “life, liberty, and property.” After stating that human rights stem from the dignity that comes from man being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6), Eidsmoe aptly reasons:

God also confers certain positive rights through the negative commands of Scripture. The commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exod. 20:13), confers a right to life. The command not to kidnap or enslave confers a right to liberty (Exod. 12:16; Deut. 24:7). The command, “Thou shalt not steal” (Exod 20:15) confers a right to property. (367)

Jefferson expanded Locke’s “property” to be the “pursuit of happiness” and stated in the Declaration that men are endowed by God with rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”. Amos affirms “the Declaration’s ideas are firmly rooted in the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Without the Bible and Christianity, the Declaration of Independence could never have been written” (25).

In spite of the arguable Christian origins and jargon in the Declaration of Independence, there are opposing views as to whether the American Revolution, rooted in the Declaration, can be reconciled with Biblical principles. Scripture condemns rebellion and commands obedience to authorities instituted by God (Rom.13:1-4). The Apostle Paul declares in Scripture:

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. (NASB, Rom. 13:1-2)

Sproul claims that this exhortation radically calls all citizens to obey rulers regardless of whether they are good, since the rulers are in office by the providence of God (131). Sproul aptly states, “It is significant that Paul’s words were penned when his own nation was under the rule of an oppressive tyranny, a regime that would ultimately execute the apostle himself” (131). However, “obedience to government is not unqualified” and “is not without some limitation” (Geisler 240-41). Sproul gives a good Scriptural balance is stating that “our highest obligation is to obey God” and that “we must always and ever obey the authorities over us *unless* they command us to do what God forbids or forbid us to do what God commands” (132). Moreover, House gives nineteen Scriptural examples to support that “One must disobey the laws of the state if [. . .] It commands a person to do what God prohibits (negative duty)” or “It prohibits a person to do what God commands (positive duty)” (159-60). As an example of two situations, the Hebrew midwives refused to obey Pharaoh in murdering male infants (Exodus 1), and Peter and John refused to obey man’s law to stop preaching about Jesus (Acts 4-5). Analyzing all the divinely approved Biblical examples of men and women who disobeyed authority shows that they were commanded to do evil and they did not violently fight; instead, they disobeyed nonviolently, perhaps would flee, and accepted the consequence of their disobedience unto the Lord. Based on these Scriptural principles, Geisler claims “it is not possible to justify the American Revolution” (254).

Christians today and in the colonial era justify the American Revolution by broadening the limitations and conditions for disobedience towards government. The Scriptural view of civil disobedience discussed in the previous paragraph permits disobedience to government: “When it commands evil”, “When it compels evil actions”, “When it negates freedom”, and “When it is religiously oppressive” (Geisler 243). However, other Christians believe that government should be

disobeyed not just when it commands Christians to do evil but also when it promotes a law that is contrary to the Word of God (241). Under this approach, disobedience to government is permitted: “When it permits evil”, “When it promulgates evil laws”, “When it limits freedom”, and “When it is politically oppressive” (243). The Christian form of this view first appeared in 1643 in Samuel Rutherford’s work on political science, *Lex Rex*, which was popularized by John Locke and later incorporated into the Declaration by Jefferson (House 168). Geisler summarizes these views as presented in Francis Schaeffer’s *Christian Manifesto*: “The power of government is not absolute”; “The law is above the government”; “Governments which rule contrary to God’s law are tyrannical”; “Citizens should resist a tyrannical government”; “Resistance takes two forms: protest and force” (241-42). Amos describes the Christian theory of revolution, “if through acts of tyranny the highest ruler in a country forfeits his right to rule, lower officers who still have a right to rule can declare a change of government” (131). Prior to the Revolution, Jonathan Mayhew of Boston preached, “It is blasphemy to call tyrants and oppressors God’s ministers . . . When [magistrates] rob and ruin the public, instead of being guardians of its peace and welfare, they immediately cease to be the ordinance and ministers of God [. . .]” (qtd. in Marshall and Manuel 264). Amos explains that, in accordance with God’s law and man’s inalienable rights, King George III was a tyrant because “he [was] bent on destruction” and “Jefferson listed over thirty reasons, showing that the king was more than a bad or incompetent ruler”; thus, “he had lost the right to rule” since “men must endure bad government but not a tyrannical one” (32). Marshall and Manuel support the thought that a ruler becomes a tyrant when he breaks the commandment of 2 Samuel 23:3 that states that a ruler must be just and rule in the fear of God (260). “[Reformer John] Calvin said that ‘dictatorships and unjust authorities are not ordained governments.’ These qualifiers have been regarded in times past as loopholes by which revolutions against existing governments may sometimes be justified” (Sproul 131). While Geisler believes “revolutions are always unjust” (250), Amos shares a Biblical story about a revolution against wicked queen Athaliah that was approved of by God (131), but Geisler sees this as a “divinely sanctioned special theocratic case” and not as an example for others to follow (250). The Declaration of Independence “proclaims a belief in just revolutions against unjust governments” (Geisler 249) and has found some Christian support since its inception.

Other rationales have been given to show a Christian influence upon the American Revolution as described in the Declaration. According to Beliles and McDowell, “the American colonists were not in rebellion (from God’s perspective) in their struggle for independence from Britain, but were acting in accordance with the Biblical guidelines for resisting tyranny [First, protest or legal action; Second, flight or emigrate; Third, force in self-defense]” (31-35). According to LaHaye, “it was the ministers of Puritan and Calvinistic theology who did the most to justify the colonists’ revolt from the tyranny of King George III. Many historians have noted that without the support of the colonial ministry, there wouldn’t have been a Revolutionary War” (71). Marshall and Manuel write, “Never before had God taken a body of Christians and planted them in a land where there was no immediate civil authority, where, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they were to establish their own civil authority” (257). Thus, if “they voluntarily gave up their authority to govern themselves,” the colonial ministers felt that the new Americans would be guilty of giving up their freedom that was given by God (257) as referenced in Galatians 5:1, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free, therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (NASB). After analyzing in detail the historical and Biblical roots of the theory of revolution, Amos states:

The American Revolution, as enshrined in the terms of the Declaration of Independence, was both legal and Christian. It was legal in that it was carried out on principles which had been part and parcel of the British law tradition for centuries. It

was “Christian” in that all the principles included in the Declaration of Independence agreed with, and probably grew directly from, the Biblical teaching about revolution as formulated by major Catholic and Protestant theorists over a span of seven hundred years. [. . .] But the theory of the revolution was “Christian” in the sense that the principles of the American Revolution, whether rightly or wrongly applied, were an inheritance left to colonial Americans by earlier generations of Christian writers. (149-50)

In summary, an arguable case can be made that Christianity has had a considerable influence upon the writers, writings, and adoption of the Declaration of Independence and the theory of the American Revolution.

In conclusion, the adoption of the Declaration of Independence is one of the most important events in American history. This writer has gained personal insight as a result of researching the events surrounding the adoption. First of all, it is interesting to observe that the decision for independence did not happen overnight, but it was a long gradual process that had its roots in the preaching of the First Great Awakening. The fires of independence were stirred by subsequent preachers in denominational churches, especially Presbyterian and Congregationalist. While there were many colonial grievances towards Parliament and eventually the King, especially taxation without representation, the freedoms enjoyed by the colonists were arguably better than the limited freedom of many others throughout the world at that time. Nevertheless, a masterpiece came from a draft by Jefferson that was edited by his committee and Congress into the Declaration of Independence. This document arguably was influenced by Christianity and had Christian terminology and concepts. Once support was gathered by each of the thirteen British colonies, the Declaration was adopted and made a bold proclamation to the world that America was a separate nation from Britain. Whether the American Revolution can be justified Biblically or not, this writer believes that God used the American Revolution to found a nation on Christian principles. In many ways this writer shares Geisler’s perspective on the American Revolution as he states:

There is a difference between what is born and how it is born. We are certainly glad for every human being born of fornication or even rape, although we certainly do not approve of the way they got here. Likewise, an American Christian can celebrate what was born of the American Revolution (a great free country) without thereby approving of the way it arrived. (254)

The principles that were adopted in the Declaration have transformed the United States over the past two centuries as emphasis has been placed on seeing and believing that “all men are created equal” and have rights endowed by God that are to be upheld by the government. The Declaration inspired a new form of government that could serve the people of America better, and thus enabled the United States of America to become the greatest nation on earth in the twenty-first century. The adoption of the Declaration of Independence deserves a prominent place in the thoughts of all Americans, especially on the Fourth of July.

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The condition of the parchment Declaration of Independence is a sign of the place it has held in the hearts of many Americans. Years of public display have faded and worn this treasured document. Today it is maintained under the most exacting archival conditions possible. [Declaration Home Page](#). [View in National Archives Catalog](#). [Snippet](#). [Shop the National Archives Store](#).