



Department of Justice

ADDRESS

15 MAR 1987

OF

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS
NATIONAL CONVENTION

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NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from this text. However, he stands behind this text as printed.

I'm sure that those of you here this afternoon need no reminder of the change we've seen in the past 25 years or so in the status of religion, at least as far as religion's relationship to government is concerned. The American people remain as religious as ever. But our government is a different story. Judicial rulings have tended to push religion, especially the more traditional religions of the Western world, from the public square, thus minimizing their influence.

One result is that a goal outlined by self-styled humanists in the '30s -- the secularization of American education -- has largely been achieved. In many schools, value-free sex education is in, but prayer -- even a neutral moment of silence that to some people looks like prayer -- is out. In neighborhoods, stores selling obscenity find ready defenders in the civil liberties establishment, but creches of the Christ-child at Bethlehem are ruled unconstitutional.

I never fail to be amazed at what the militant secularists seem to think happened at the founding of our country. They seem to think of the Founders as men who quoted from John Locke but despised the Bible; as men of the Enlightenment who had no more than token respect for Christianity.

Now it happens that the Founders were men of the Enlightenment, and many of them did know their Locke, who by the way was also a Christian. But they did not take Enlightenment

ideas, shall we say, dogmatically. They tested them against the Christianity they had inherited, and they arrived at a synthesis. They believed in human rights, and at the same time, they remembered where human rights come from.

As a matter of fact, there was an ordained minister among the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He was also an educator. He was thoroughly familiar with Locke, yet thoroughly loyal to the Word of God. I am speaking of the Rev. John Witherspoon.

Today, as we commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the Constitution, I would like to share with you a few thoughts on how men such as Witherspoon were able to balance piety with politics.

John Witherspoon is somewhat forgotten today, except at Princeton University, which he served as president in its early days. Everywhere else, there seems to be almost a certain embarrassment about the fact that so devout a minister as John Witherspoon was also such an active and eloquent defender of natural rights and the course of American independence.

As a matter of fact, John Witherspoon was an immigrant. He came to our shores from Scotland, and it is his career over there, before coming here, that tells us where he stood theologically.

Those of you who are Presbyterians will remember that in Scotland, which was the motherland of Presbyterianism at that time, that the church was divided between advocates of lax and

imprecise theology, called Moderates, and those of the orthodox and evangelical persuasion, known as Popularists.

Now while John Witherspoon was still a very young minister, he emerged as a champion of the Popularists. In fact his fame spread throughout Great Britain because of a pamphlet he wrote satirizing the Moderates. Part of the Moderate creed, as Dr. Witherspoon summed it up, went like this:

I believe that the universe is a huge machine, wound up from everlasting by necessity, and consisting of an indefinite number of links and chains.... I believe that there is no ill in the universe, nor any such thing as virtue absolutely considered; that those things vulgarly called sins, are only errors in the judgment, and foils to set off the beauty of Nature....

And so on. Against all that, Dr. Witherspoon eloquently defended traditional Christianity, according to the Calvinist theology that was the patrimony of his church.

Now, in the American colonies, learned ministers were very few, owing to a lack of seminaries and the small number of colleges. So, when a small new Presbyterian college called the College of New Jersey needed a new president, the trustees sent across the sea and imported John Witherspoon. In 1768, at the age of 45, John Witherspoon moved to his new country as president of the College of New Jersey.

That college, of course, was located in the town of Princeton, and it eventually adopted that name and went on to a great destiny among American centers of learning.

Witherspoon's influence as a teacher at Princeton would in many ways touch and shape the subsequent history of his adopted country. For in his classes sat some of the future leaders of the republic. Not least of which was James Madison, Jr. from Orange County, Virginia. Madison, you see, was something of a feeble and sickly young man who was so concerned about his health that he chose to go north for his education rather than to the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg. The swampy lands around Williamsburg, he was convinced, would prove detrimental to his fragile constitution.

From 1769 to 1772 the young Madison studied at Princeton. And there were others who learned their ways at Witherspoon's knee, as well. William Bradford, one of Madison's best friends and a future Attorney General of the United States, for example, was there.

And what they learned at Princeton served them well, indeed. For it was there that they were introduced to the great works of philosophy and political science that so dominated their age, both politically and intellectually. In particular, they were exposed to the writers and thinkers who formed what we know today as the Scottish Enlightenment, that vibrant time when Edinburgh and Glasgow were producing some of the greatest republican thinkers of all time -- men such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Lord Kames, and David Hume, among others.

In his class on moral philosophy, for example, Witherspoon endeavored to counteract the influence of David Hume by exposing his students to other thinkers. Witherspoon considered Hume to be an "infidel" who sought to propagate an amoral project through his "peculiar" scheme of morals that served only to "raise metaphysical subtleties, and confound the understanding." To put it simply, Witherspoon sought to counteract the morally debilitating effect of the teachings of Hume, whom he considered to be the towering secular humanist of his age.

Witherspoon understood that ideas do have consequences and that the best ideas have the best consequences. Thus it was important to show the poverty of the worst ideas before they had a pernicious influence on society.

Just how convincing Witherspoon was to his young charges such as Madison is a matter of scholarly debate. But this much is sure: He taught them the important role ideas play in politics and the obligation of public men to take ideas seriously.

At Princeton, Witherspoon encouraged his students to apply the lessons of their classical studies to the problems of the day, and he took an interest in the growing movement for independence that was already gathering steam when he came to America. While he always kept politics out of the pulpit, he became known for his sympathy for the colonial cause.

A moment of truth came for Dr. Witherspoon in May of 1776. By that time, there had been shots fired in anger between the Americans and the British for more than a year. The Continental Congress was close to issuing a formal declaration of

independence. New Jersey had just thrown out its royal governor (Ben Franklin's illegitimate son, by the way), and the colony was ruled by a provincial congress, of which Witherspoon was a member.

The Continental Congress had called for a nation-wide -- or should I say "colonies-wide" at this point -- a colonies-wide day of fasting to invoke divine blessings on the American cause. John Witherspoon preached a sermon that day, and naturally the church was packed and expectant.

As I said, Witherspoon was not one to politicize his preaching, and even now he did so only very gingerly. But there are times when a man of God cannot avoid topics that others might deem political.

He entitled the sermon The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men. He reminded his listeners that God's Providence is all-embracing, and that the fates of all the excited and uncertain people in that congregation were in God's hands.

He remarked that the present time was a "season of public judgment," and then noted:

That curiosity and attention at least are raised in some degree is plain from the unusual throng of this assembly.

He urged his listeners to examine their lives now, because: "Those who shall first fall in battle have not many more warnings to receive."

Having thus raised the emotional temperature, he turned to what they were most waiting to hear:

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.

Then he made a point about the relation between religion and liberty:

The knowledge of God and his truths has been chiefly confined to those parts of the earth where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen.... [T]here 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.

Well, that sermon made news, and only days later, Witherspoon was one of those chosen to represent New Jersey at the Continental Congress. He and his two colleagues arrived at

Independence Hall on June 22nd, 1776, in time to catch the tail-end of a speech by John Adams making the case for independence.

The other members of the Congress, for various reasons, offered to delay the debate so that the New Jerseyans could get caught up, but Witherspoon said he understood the issues, and that was true enough. So, on July 4th, he became one of those to put their signatures on the Declaration of Independence. You can find his signature in the second column from the right, just below that of his fellow Princetonian, Richard Stockton. As a sort of scholarly flourish, he abbreviated his first name "Jns," which stands for Joannes, the Latin form of John.

John Witherspoon has a lot to teach us today. In particular, I think he is right about the link between civil and religious liberty. It is absurd to oppose them, as some do today, treating civil liberty as something that severely limits or even excludes exercises of religious liberty.

Our First Amendment to the Constitution, as originally understood, certainly does not compel the expulsion of religion from our public life. We do not and should not have an established church: we are not a confessing nation. But neither are we a disbelieving one, and our Constitution permits and indeed protects the free exercise of religion.

John Witherspoon is also significant as an example of the natural compatibility of evangelical Christianity, such as your organization represents, and the principles on which this nation was founded. Witherspoon had no need to change his views when he changed his nationality. He moved easily and naturally from