



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN OF
THE OL-
SEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

The Foundation of Our Rights

By Kyle Pope

After long debate and discussion, when the Second Continental Congress finally decided to separate the American colonies from the British Empire, a committee of five was chosen to compose the declaration. Thomas Jefferson wrote the original draft, with other members offering editorial changes. When submitted to congress it was reduced by a fourth of its size, edited for grammar, approved on July 2, then signed two days later on July 4, 1776.

The first sentence spoke of rights to which, “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle” us. The second became one of the most well known assertions in human history. It declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Eighty-two years later these words were used in debates over slavery. In Abraham Lincoln’s debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858 he quoted this arguing for an end to the practice. Today, while our secular world no longer considers the existence of a Creator something “self-evident,” this assertion continues to be used to argue for “rights” as diverse as public health care, economic security, or even immoral behavior, public indecency, abortion, and many other things. While God is dismissed as a source of rights, it is now held that “Laws of Nature” and government “entitle” and have “endowed” us with the right to expect these things as our due.

The Concept of Inalienable Rights

Jefferson's appeal to "inalienable" (or as in the final version "unalienable") rights refers to something, "unable to be taken away from or given away by the possessor" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Jefferson was not the first to use this language. It is believed that the Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson first spoke of rights in this way. In his 1725 work *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, his argument was not that we are entitled to receive certain things. Instead, he argued that things belong to us from our creation that no government should take away. When they are, he contended, it grants the "right of resistance," claiming, "Unalienable Rights are essential Limitations in all Governments" (Treatise

2, § 7.10). This was why the signers of the Declaration of Independence employed this wording—they argued the king had deprived them of rights that should not be taken away.

"Among These Are . . ."

Jefferson's wording is interesting in a number of ways. First, it assumes there are other *rights* (not specified) that are granted by God and nature, that no one can take away. The Bill of Rights, later amended to the US Constitution, articulated such rights. It did not *grant* these rights but acknowledged that government could not infringe upon them. Second, the three things Jefferson mentioned are significant. In 1690 British physician and philosopher John Locke argued that men being "equal and independent" ought not "harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" because we are "all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker" (*Second Treatise of Government*, chap. 2, § 6). He too, argued the right to resist injury, claiming man has, "by nature a power, . . . to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men" (*ibid.*, chap. 7, § 87). Locke's formula of *life, liberty, and estate* (or *property*) was well known by the time of Jefferson. In 1772, Samuel Adams affirmed these three as the "natural rights," of the colonists (*The Rights of the Colonists*, chap. 1). Jefferson never explained why he substituted "the pursuit of happiness" for "property," but it may have been to avoid a purely material idea of property. Locke probably meant more than just real estate. In 1792, James Madison argued that "property" includes one's personal and religious convictions and "the free use of his faculties and free choice of the objects on which to employ them" (*Papers*, "Property" March 29, 1792). We now call this "intellectual property." Whatever Jefferson's motive, we must ask if



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the Bible supports this concept of “inalienable rights” and if these ideas we share as Americans are compatible with what it means to be a Christian.

The Biblical Foundation of Rights

Scripture speaks of *rights* in terms of the “authority” or “power” one has over things. God gives man “**power to eat of**” the labor of his hands as a “**gift of God**” (Eccl. 5:19). One is to exercise “**power over his own will**” (1 Cor. 7:37). Although Paul had the “**power**” to have a wife or receive support from churches (1 Cor. 9:4-6, KJV), he did not “**use this authority**” (GLT) lest he hinder the “**gospel of Christ**” (1 Cor. 9:12,). Scripture affirms, “**there is no authority except from God**” (Rom. 13:1b). This is true of civil authority and personal rights—true rights are only derived from God.

How are these rights known? Scripture speaks of God’s “**ordinances**” over the heavens and the earth (Job 38:33; Ps. 119:90-91), but God’s will for man is not inherently placed within us. Jeremiah wrote, “**the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps**” (Jer. 10:23). It is by God’s word that man’s steps must be directed (Ps. 119:133). It is through “**God-breathed**” Scripture (NIV) that one is “**equipped for every good work**” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NKJV). Any concept of “*natural law*” is only true if it conforms to God’s revealed law.

Does God’s law grant *inalienable* rights? Yes and no. There are obligations to God that cannot be surrendered to another. If human demands ever require disobedience to God, in every case, “**We must obey God rather than men**” (Acts 5:29, NASB). This suggests that a higher divine law supersedes any power that others (even civil government) exercise over us. Each person must act based upon the dictates of personal conscience. Paul taught, “**whatever is not from faith is sin**” (Rom. 14:23b, NKJV). Yet, while it is always wrong to act contrary to our conscience, if our conscience is not properly trained by Scripture we can condemn ourselves by acting contrary to God’s law (Rom. 14:22b; cf. Acts 23:1).

As the Bible teaches it, liberty is a relative right. Paul taught, “**Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty**” (2 Cor. 3:17) and James called the Law of Christ, “**the perfect law of liberty**” (Jas. 1:25). This largely addresses freedom from sin and the burdens of the Old Law. If one has the right to act upon the dictates of his or her conscience there is an inalienable right to free-will. However, that does not mean we have an inalienable right to liberty in all areas of our lives. Paul commanded, “**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities**” (Rom. 13:1a). The Bible does not teach a concept of individual sovereignty. All souls have obligations to others and to the government that is over them. Personal liberty can be limited based on behavior or economic need. When Paul was arrested, although he defended his own innocence (Acts 25:7), he did not object to the right of the government to restrict his liberty. When Paul taught on slavery (an institution in ancient times built on financial need or victory in battle rather than race) he did not condemn masters for restricting the liberty of slaves.



If there is no authority except from God, civil authority does not grant or establish rights—it is its duty to uphold principles God has revealed (Rom. 13:17). The right to life should be upheld by civil authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2), although behavior can require the forfeiture of this right (Acts 25:11). Government has the right to take life in punishment for wrongdoing (cf. Rom. 13:4), but it must act with justice and impartiality in doing so (Deut. 16:19).

Instead, he taught proper behavior servants and masters should practice (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:18-20). Our modern employee-employer relationship demands the surrender of a measure of personal liberty to meet our obligations on the job. A Christian must be willing to surrender some rights for the good of others (Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:13), and endure mistreatment in certain cases (Matt. 5:39-42; 1 Cor. 6:7), although in other cases he has the right to flee from persecution (Matt. 10:23).

As the Bible teaches it, happiness comes as a consequence of serving God (Ps. 146:5; Prov. 29:18), but any right to pursue it must be conditioned upon obedience to divine law. There is no right to pursue whatever makes us happy if it does not conform to God's law. God promises contentment and happiness in obedience to Him, but does not set personal happiness as the ultimate goal of life (cf. 1 Pet. 5:10). As Christians, while we are proud to live in a free nation, let us always shape our view of our *rights* on God's word—not on the popular sentiments of our culture.

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