



## Lesson Guide

### Lesson 10 – The American Experiment: Stepping Stones

#### Introduction

For this tour we will remain in the southwest sector of the compass long enough to examine a special sub-category of our last topic of discussion: the *design of the state*. In particular, we want to take a brief look at the question, “What should *God’s minister* on earth (Romans 13:4) look like? What is a proper form for this *agency* that is divinely appointed and commissioned to administer justice, punish evil, and encourage goodness among its citizens or subjects?” We will approach this task by considering the *American Experiment*.

#### Themes

From the beginning, Dr. Tackett lays down three ground rules for this study: first, we will not seek to deify America; and second, we will not seek to deify the Founding Fathers (the third ground rule will be dealt with at the end of the lesson). Having established these guidelines, he hastens to point out that there are compelling reasons for giving special attention to the subject of this tour. The American Experiment has the potential to prove unusually conducive to a deeper understanding of God’s design for the state precisely because it is *unique* in the history of the world. Here on these shores, and here alone, people with a strong Christian worldview have been afforded an unparalleled opportunity to create from scratch what they considered an ideal system of government – a system designed in careful conformity with the principles outlined in Lesson 9.

We begin by establishing the biblical character of that worldview. *The New England Primer*, the second best-selling book (after the Bible) of the colonial era, provides an intriguing window into the attitudes of early Americans. In particular, it reveals an outlook and a way of life powerfully shaped by the teachings of Scripture. The pervasiveness of this outlook is further demonstrated in statements made by America’s early political leaders, legal and social architects, and educational pioneers – people like Benjamin Rush, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, Charles Carroll, Noah Webster, and the founders of Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia Universities. In spite of the fact that not *all* of them were practicing Christians, these luminaries agreed with President John Adams that the success of America’s republican form of government would prove directly dependent upon the virtue and morality of her people, and that virtue and morality are necessarily founded upon *religion* – by which all meant the *Christian* religion. All of these early thinkers were convinced that the state *must* be held accountable to the authority of a higher ethical and spiritual standard – the “Natural Law” or the “Law of Nature’s God” – if the human rights abuses they had observed in Europe and throughout history were to be hopefully avoided on this continent. Tragically, however, America is quickly turning away from these principles. It is hard to put a finger on the exact reasons, but one clear element came as Darwinian evolutionary theory made its influence felt in the field of law. In 1869, Harvard Law School Dean Christopher Langdell advanced the view that law is *not* based upon the transcendent standard of “Nature’s God,” but is rather a fluid and constantly mutating body of

“doctrine,” a set of purely human ideas that inevitably change “by slow degrees.” In other words, law and ethics, like biological species, are continually “evolving.” Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes expanded on this theme by declaring that the law is “simply an embodiment of the ends and purposes of a society at a given point in its history,” thus effectively granting to the *state* the power to establish society’s ethical norms. John Dewey implemented these ideas in the realm of public education. “There is no God,” said Dewey (nicknamed “The Architect of Modern Education”), “and there is no soul. Hence, there are no needs for the props of traditional religion.”

These statements, says Dr. Tackett, bring us to the present moment. Today, America has largely forgotten God and denied the validity of her biblically based Christian roots. As a result, we see the power of the state expanding in our time. This, too, is a manifestation of the perennial *Cosmic Battle*, which is always fought most fiercely in the *social* realm. Ultimately, we must face the fact that the American Experiment is likely to fail altogether if we do not take intentional and deliberate steps to salvage it. This is a task which falls primarily on the shoulders of Christian people. As believers, we need to remember God’s call to prayer and repentance in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. There is nothing to be gained, says Dr. Tackett, by casting blame on non-Christians (this is the third ground rule for our study).

### **Points to Watch For**

This last point should be kept in mind throughout the entire discussion. From beginning to end, Dr. Tackett seeks to communicate the thought that the American Experiment makes sense *only* when understood as the brainchild of Christians who operated on the basis of a biblical worldview. Just as the experiment was *instigated* by believers, so it must be *carried on* by believers – believers who care deeply and passionately about their country – if it is to survive and continue to succeed.

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1) We covered a lot of ground on this tour. Let’s list the key elements.** (Early American educational system; the New England Primer and “play not with bad boys”; Harvard rules and Columbia’s seal; Dr. Tackett’s journey in Washington D.C.; Washington’s Farewell Address; the foundations of religion and morality; the myriad of quotes from Washington, Adams, Benjamin Rush, Daniel and Noah Webster, and others; the basis of the phrase “the law of nature”; Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Law; Delaware’s oath of office, good law is based upon God’s law; the evolution of law in America; Elliot and Langdell at Harvard and the removal of Blackstone and the institution of the case method; Benjamin Franklin’s address to the Constitutional Convention; Lincoln’s call for fasting, humiliation and prayer; the call for our involvement.
- 2) Were any of these striking to you? Why?** (Spend some time on a few of these. This is critical, because it will let you know where God is working through the tours.)
- 3) It was during a re-enactment of Washington’s Farewell Address, says Dr. Tackett, that he was struck by the “sinking feeling” that he had been “lied to.” What “lies” does he have in mind, and how do they fit the pattern of the *other* lies we’ve encountered during the course of our worldview tours? Have you been subjected to such lies yourself?** (The heart of the lie is contained in Bishop Paul O’Brien’s (Universal Life Church) statement that “The United States was started by men we today would call *pagans* ... [and] Deists.” The

motive behind the lie is the same one we have observed in our discussions of philosophy, science, and history: exclude God from the system – i.e., construct a *cosmic cube* with a closed lid – and man can regard himself as free to do whatever he wants. He is no longer accountable to a higher authority.)

- 4) **Name some of the early sources for the idea of “the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” referenced by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. Why was this concept so important to the founders of the American system of government? What risks do we run in replacing this idea with Langdell’s notion of “evolving law?”** (Contrary to much popular opinion, the “natural law” was not primarily a Deistic concept. It was extremely important to the theologians of the Protestant Reformation; consider, for example, *The Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XII: “This law was at one time written in the hearts of men by the finger of God” [based upon Paul’s teaching in Romans 2:14, 15]. It is a prominent theme in the writings of Sir Edward Coke [1552-1634] and John Locke [1632-1704], both of whom tied their ideas of “natural law” securely to *the will of God*. Locke made special use of it in arguing against the “Divine Right of Kings.” It was this aspect of the theory that made it particularly appealing to Jefferson and the other founders, who saw in it a re-affirmation of the truth that rulers must be held *accountable* to a higher authority. If we jettison the “natural law” and put ethics in the hands of the state, we run the risk of re-incurring the very dangers that Locke and Jefferson were resisting: tyranny and totalitarianism.)
- 5) **What did John Adams mean when he affirmed that “... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other”?** What does this imply about the foundations of the *American Experiment* and the basic structure of the system of government it established? (In essence, Adams was agreeing with Franklin, who claimed, “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.” In other words, the American Experiment was based upon the assumption that people who accept the Christian worldview are capable of governing themselves *internally* where ethical and moral issues are concerned. Thus, conceptually speaking, the architects of America’s early government structure envisioned the Republic supported by a foundation of common morality, and morality resting on the bedrock of religion and Christian faith.)
- 6) **Why, according to Dr. Tackett, is it in vogue to hate America today? To what extent is this hatred justifiable, and to what extent is it a manifestation of the *Cosmic Battle*?** (As Christians, we must not be afraid to admit that the history of this nation has been anything but perfect. Not only should we be the first to acknowledge the sins of the past and the present – we should also lead the way to repentance, reformation, and the renewal of the Founders’ vision. At the same time, we should not be ignorant of the larger spiritual dimension of the cultural struggle we are facing today. America may not be pure and blameless, but her form of government *has* been built upon a foundation that was laid firmly and securely upon a biblical worldview and the concept that man and the state must be held accountable to a higher law. It is this, says Dr. Tackett, that has inspired the lion’s share of the hatred currently directed toward the American Experiment.
- 7) **What should we do when Adams’s assumptions no longer appear to be valid – that is, when it becomes evident that Americans can no longer be characterized as a “moral and religious people” as he understood the phrase? How do we apply the Founders’ ideas to a “multicultural” America where a flood of moral and spiritual perspectives – e.g., Buddhism,**

**spiritism, Islam, Native American religions, and Wicca – have become part of the cultural fabric?** (This, in a sense, is the crux of the entire discussion; for Dr. Tackett tells us again and again that we *have* in fact come to a place where the Christian God has been largely *forgotten* in American public life. Our response to this situation is crucial. We will accomplish nothing by striking out in anger against those who no longer share our Christian worldview. Instead, we must take upon *ourselves* the burden of praying, repenting, caring, and actively working to salvage the experiment. Most of all, we must resist the temptation to take our freedoms for granted.)

### **Historical Figure: Benjamin Franklin**

*I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of men ... I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business ...*

-- Benjamin Franklin, U. S. Constitutional Convention, June 28, 1787

"Well done is better than well said," wrote Benjamin Franklin in the 1737 edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He might have been summing up the story of his life. For Franklin was, above all else, a man who attempted to distinguish himself by *doing well*. An accomplished polymath and thoroughgoing pragmatist, he had a keen desire to understand the inner mechanics of things – printing presses, stoves, musical instruments, eyeglasses, electricity, government – and to apply this hard-won knowledge to the advancement of efficiency and progress in the affairs of mankind. In the final analysis, it was precisely his utilitarian viewpoint that motivated him to "implore the assistance of heaven" at the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Whatever else Franklin may have believed about prayer, he clearly believed that it brought results. And that, with him, was always the essential point.

Born January 17, 1706, Benjamin Franklin was the tenth and youngest son of Josiah Franklin, a Boston soap-and candle-maker, and Abiah Folger Franklin, Josiah's second wife. His father meant to bring the boy up for a career in the church; but when it became clear that the cost of a clergyman's education was beyond the family's means, Ben was withdrawn from school (after only two years of study) and put to work making candles.

Proving ill-disposed to the trade, he was apprenticed to his older brother James, printer and publisher of *The New England Courant*, America's second newspaper. It was in James's print shop that the self-education of Benjamin Franklin began in earnest. Easy access to reading material led to a love for books, and the adolescent Franklin devoured the works of Bunyan, Defoe, Mather, Addison, Locke, and Steele. He trained himself as a writer, too, secretly composing a series of pointed social commentaries for the *Courant* under the pseudonym of *Silence Dogood*. When his barbed pen earned him the enmity of the authorities, the seventeen-year-old Franklin was obliged to flee Boston under suspicion of being an "atheist and infidel." Finding no work for a printer in New York, Ben set out on foot for Philadelphia, the city that was to become his personal Promised Land. There he met his future wife, Deborah Read (they were married in 1730), and there, through hard work, auspicious connections, and plenty of hands-on training (including a two-year sojourn in the best print houses of London), he achieved such proficiency in his trade that he eventually became master of Philadelphia's principal printing office and a respected community leader.

Turning his attention to public affairs, Franklin poured his energies into a series of community projects, convening an influential debating club ("the Junto") and playing a key role in the establishment of America's first subscription library. He was also instrumental in founding a philosophical society, a hospital, a firefighting company, and two institutions of higher education (later to become the University of Pennsylvania and the Franklin and Marshall College).

Publication of his much loved and broadly influential *Poor Richard's Almanack* began in 1732. He was chosen to the Pennsylvania legislature in 1736 and appointed Postmaster General in 1737. By expanding his printing concerns into an inter-colonial franchise he became so prosperous that by age forty-two he was able to retire from business and devote himself full-time to politics, writing, inventing, and scientific pursuits. Of the latter, his experiments with electricity, including his famous scheme to "draw lightning from the clouds" by flying a kite in a thunderstorm, brought him international fame as an eminent "natural philosopher."

In 1757 the legislature sent Franklin to London to represent the people of Pennsylvania in a dispute with the Proprietors of the colony. So effectively did he acquit himself in this capacity that he was asked to serve as colonial agent for Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia as well. While living in England he emerged as the colonists' leading spokesman in the debates over the Stamp Act (1765) and the subsequent chain of controversial legislation leading to the American Revolution. As relations between his homeland and the Mother Country grew more difficult, Franklin became increasingly convinced that the final solution lay in independence for the American colonies.

Returning to Philadelphia a month before Lexington and Concord, he was appointed by the second Continental Congress to serve as a member of the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. Once the Revolution had begun in earnest, Congress dispatched him to France where he remained until the end of the war, negotiating an alliance with the government of Louis XVI. In 1783 he played a major role in finalizing the details of the Treaty of Paris between the United States and Great Britain. In diplomacy, as in everything else he attempted, Franklin proved himself a savant of deft ability and brilliant insight.

At the age of eighty-one, Benjamin Franklin performed his final service to the new nation by taking part in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. There his influence proved crucial to the difficult task of hammering out a compromise acceptable to the representatives of all thirteen states. This climactic conclusion to Franklin's public career, characterized as it was by his clarion call to prayer and faith in God, is all the more remarkable in light of the unorthodox theological views he held at the time. Though a self-styled Deist and sometime polytheist who doubted the divinity of Jesus and rejected other essentials of the Christian creed, he could not fail to see the *utilitarian* value of the Bible's moral and spiritual teachings. As a man of business and practical affairs he was compelled to admit that Christianity, whether he accepted its doctrines or not, actually *worked* – that it was in fact more conducive to social welfare than the worldview of freethinking rationalists. In this, as in every other aspect of his life, Franklin found the appeal of the *pragmatic* absolutely irresistible. In old age Franklin became a staunch abolitionist, freeing his own slaves and serving a term as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. He was released from public affairs in 1788 and spent a significant portion of his final years attempting to complete his *Autobiography*, a work begun in 1771 (for the benefit of his son) and taken up again in 1784 at the behest of a friend who had urged him to "invite all wise men to become like yourself, and other men to become wise."<sup>1</sup> He died in Philadelphia on April 17, 1790 at the age of eighty-four.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 85.