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James Burton Coffman

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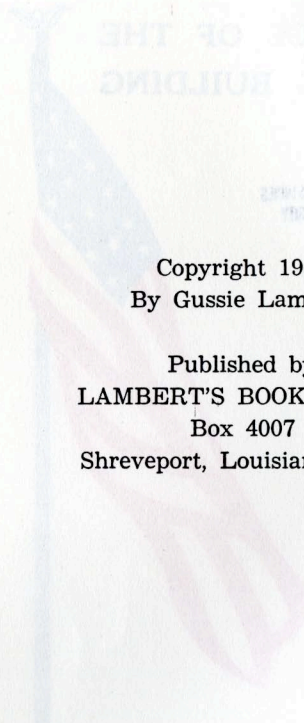
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THE INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE IN THE BUILDING OF AMERICA

CENTER FOR RESTORATION STUDIES
ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY



By
JAMES BURTON COFFMAN



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THE INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE IN THE BUILDING OF AMERICA

A Lecture

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By

JAMES BURTON COFFMAN

The influence of the Bible in the building of America is so profound and extensive that one cannot escape beholding it no matter which way he may turn. When an American directs his thoughts to the genesis of our beloved country, the Bible rises to view like the solar orb at daybreak, claiming the center of the stage.

The influence of the Bible is apparent in the Mother Country from whose womb our nation crept as a feeble infant to found an empire in the wilderness of North America. It is also explicit in the larger framework of Western civilization that contains both the Mother Country and our own. It permeates, because it produced, the value-judgments by which all of us live. It is luminous in the lives of the vast majority of those great men who led our historical progression. It is written into the constitutions of the several states, inscribed upon the monuments that honor our heroes, and solemnly proclaimed in the ceremonial of our government, in the motto on our coinage, and in the basic assumptions that underlie the total life of the United States of America.

IN THE MOTHER COUNTRY

During the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, an ambassador from one of the African Princes asked on behalf of his lord what was the secret of England's greatness. The Queen replied, "Tell your Prince that this book (the Bible) is the secret of England's greatness."

Victor Hugo declared that "England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave witness in these words, "For more than a thousand years, the Bible, collectively taken, has gone hand in hand with civilization, science, law — in short, with the moral and intellectual cultivation of the species, always supporting, and often leading the way."

Sir William Blackstone, described by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "the most famous of English jurists," observed that, "The Bible has always been regarded as part of the Common Law of England."

IN AMERICA

It is not surprising, therefore, that the children of that society brought with them to the inhospitable shores of a new world the most sacred regard for the Bible and allowed its influence to have free course in the new society which they produced. That influence appeared at once. When the passengers aboard the *Mayflower* discovered that they were to land far beyond the perimeter of their royal grant, they signed an agreement, a basis of government, the renowned *Mayflower Compact*, based upon

the Bible, and beginning with the solemn words, "In the name of God, Amen!"

When the sorrows of the American Revolution descended upon them, they made a Liberty Bell and inscribed upon its bronze throat the words from the Bible, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants thereof." — Leviticus 25:10. During the long uncertainties of the war that followed, it was the figure of General George Washington, kneeling in the snows of Jackey Hollow, that, more than anything else, nerved and inspired the colonists to achieve final victory. That sacred dependence of our national life upon the Bible and its significance, is, even today, memorialized with Ward's famous bronze plaque on Wall Street, New York City, where in the tall canyons of international wealth, Washington still kneels in the shadows.

It was the same story during the crisis that marked the bonding of the thirteen colonies into a United States by means of the constitution. It was to the God of the Bible that they turned for wisdom and guidance. When it appeared that all was lost, Benjamin Franklin rose from the third tier of seats on the left and addressed General Washington in the chair, "Mr. Chairman, If a sparrow cannot fall to ground without Our Heavenly Father's care, how can an Empire rise without His aid? I call the convention to prayer." They rose from their knees to sign the Constitution of the United States.

Even the tragedy of the Civil War was touched here and there with a shaft of light from the Bible; and when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865, a great unruly mob gathered on Wall Street in New York. On

that dark night it was a man who would later be President of the United States, a gospel preacher by the name of James A. Garfield, who quelled the mob by reading a passage from the Bible with his own appropriate comment. He turned to Psalm 97, verse 2, and read, "Fellow Citizens, 'Clouds and darkness are round about Him. His pavilion is dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. Justice and judgment are the establishment of his throne. Mercy and truth shall go before His face.' Fellow Citizens, God reigns, and the government in Washington still lives."

THE VERY THEORY OF DEMOCRACY IS A BIBLICAL CONCEPTION

If there was ever a single sentence that catches the essence of democracy, it must be found in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg who stated that the Civil War was being fought to determine that, "Government of the people, and by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." And yet, it is a great tragedy that most people do not know where Abraham Lincoln got those words. They came out of the preface to the Wycliff Bible, translated by Wycliff and Hereford, and written centuries before Abraham Lincoln was born in a Kentucky wilderness. The quotation from the preface of Wycliff's Bible reads, "*The Bible* is the government of the people, and by the people, and for the people!"

On the same occasion when Lincoln uttered his immortal words at Gettysburg, there was another speaker, the renowned Edward Everett, who, in fact, delivered what was called the principal address. And, if one judged it merely by its two and one half hours length, probably it

was. In spite of his general failure, however, he did make one statement worthy to be compared with Lincoln's. He said, "All the distinctive features and superiority of our republican institutions are derived from the teachings of the Scriptures."

Charles David Eldridge also identified the Bible as the source of all social justice. He said, "The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament writers denounce the exclusive privileges of the rich, and the usurpation of the rights of the poor, and strenuously enforce their demands for righteous dealings among men. The Bible, like an unfailing arsenal, has supplied the ammunition for the agelong struggle for liberty."

THE BASIC LAW OF OUR NATION

Thus, it is not merely in the eloquent speeches of national leaders, nor in crisis-charged dramatic episodes alone that the influence of the Bible is detected in the birth and growth of our nation. It is consciously and conspicuously contained in the basic legal devices of the country. Dean Clarence Manion, Chairman of the Department of Law, Notre Dame University, has scrupulously examined the constitutions of all the states and affirms that the Bible is the basic law in forty-seven states, the Ten Commandments being specifically named in forty-seven of the state constitutions.

Walter C. Speers said that, "Democracy is nothing but an attempt to apply the principles of the Bible to a human society." Ulysses S. Grant admonished the United States to, "Hold fast to the Bible as the sheet anchor of your liberties; write its precepts in your hearts, and practice them in your lives. To the influence of this book,

we are indebted for all the progress made in true civilization, and to this we must look as our guide to the future. 'Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.' " Robert E. Lee declared that the Bible, "is a Book, in comparison with which, all others are of minor importance."

Added to these verbal testimonies are the tradition and ceremonial of the entire government. The Supreme Court is never convened to announce its decisions without the traditional invocation, "God bless the United States of America and this Honorable Court!" No session of the United States Senate nor of the House of Representatives is ever begun until the chaplain has offered prayer. Practically all of the Presidents have taken the oath of office with hands solemnly imposed upon the Bible. Such actions are a continual witness of our Biblical heritage and of the Bible's influence in the building of America. They are the most eloquent proof that the Bible does indeed underlie the total moral and legal structure of our society.

IN GOD WE TRUST

Particular attention is directed to the motto inscribed on the money and the coinage of the United States, "In God We Trust!" Recently, in Oklahoma City, the Mayfair congregation invited me to preach a series of sixteen sermons on that theme as the basis for a revival meeting. I believe that all of us were surprised at the profound implications of that motto. "In God We Trust," means that God is. It means that God is a person. It means that God is worthy of our confidence. It means that God is solemnly and officially recognized as the Author of all national

wealth and benefit. It means that we should obey God. And it means that God has not left himself without witness, even in the present society which seems to be on the verge of rejecting God altogether. Just think of it; every time some sinner puts down the money to gratify his lust, satiate his greed, or indulge his ambition, there, printed on his very thumb, are the words, "In God We Trust!" It is like Paul who spoke of a certain godless age and said, "Nevertheless (God) left not himself without witness!" — Acts 14:17.

THE VALUE-JUDGMENTS OF AMERICA

Even such things as we have already noted do not exhaust the sure and certain evidence of Biblical influence and dominance in our vaunted culture. The most compelling and overwhelming evidence of all is found in an examination of the value-judgments which have been received and have been accorded the status of axioms in our entire Western Civilization, and in which, as in a matrix, lies embedded the precious jewel that is called America.

These value-judgments are:

1. That all men are equal before the law
2. That peace is more desirable than war
3. That all the races of mankind are brothers
4. That the individual is of supreme importance
5. That humility is better than strutting power

The equality of men before the law is an accepted principle of Western culture, but where could such an idea have originated if not in the Bible? Take the classic case of King David of Israel who took Bathsheba and murdered her husband. In the light of the conduct of all the

Oriental monarchs who ever lived, there was absolutely nothing wrong with what David did; but a Biblical prophet put his finger in David's face and declared, "Thou art the man!" And what did David do? Did he cut off the prophet's head, as any other ancient king would have done? No! He confessed his sins and begged God for forgiveness. And, from that faroff example, came the concept that not even a King is above the Law of God. Such a concept is found nowhere else on earth. The planet earth does not even yet allow this maxim in those lands where the Bible is not received. For example, does any one suppose that Chairman Mao is, alongside of his slaves, equal before the law? Of course not. The equality of men before the law is uniquely a Biblical ethic. It does not exist beyond the circumference of Biblical influence.

Take the desirability of peace as contrasted with war. Whence came the view that peace is any better than war? The primitives of North America held no such view. As a matter of fact, the whole conviction that peace is a blessing is absolutely incompatible with unregenerated humanity. Such modern tyrants as Mussolini and Adolph Hitler both expressed a preference for war and consciously chose for themselves and their nations what they thought to be the advantages of war. Why were they able to do such an abominable thing? Because both consciously rejected the teachings of the Bible. No, the preference of peace is not a desire that flows out of unregenerated man, but it comes from the benign influence of the Prince of Peace, as revealed in the Bible, that challenges men and makes them ashamed as they move over gro-

tesque moonlit battlefields at night, covering the faces of the dead as they advance! It is the light that shines in the Bible that allows men to see the atrocious ugliness of war. Take the Bible away, and men will automatically revert to pillage, plunder, rape, and bloodshed, as easily as the swine returns to her wallowing in the mire.

The Brotherhood of man is a Biblical value-judgment; but it is a value-judgment that cannot exist apart from the Bible. The Bible in its entirety, with both the Old and New Testaments is the basis of human brotherhood. Without the Bible, either part of it, there can be no brotherhood. The present conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis is the classical example of human brotherhood without the Bible. The Israeli's have not the New Testament, and the Arabs have neither the Old nor the New. Yes, they are brothers, all right, all of them being the children of Abraham, the Israelis through Isaac whose mother was Sarah, and the Arabs through Ishmael whose mother was Hagar, and through others whose mother was Keturah; but the point is that no mere fleshly relationship can suffice. The Bible is the only true bond of human brotherhood that has any meaning. I recently listened to the long debates in the United Nations Security Council and was pleased at the universally held conviction that peace is better than war and that all nations are brothers and should treat each other as brothers. But it was the Biblically orientated nations that laid the greatest stress on these things; and even in those case, the speakers did not seem to realize that their seeming wisdom was not of themselves but of God and of the Bible, and that the

achievement of all those goals held to be so desirable was possible only through acknowledging and accepting the Bible as a guide for human behaviour.

The supreme value of the individual is perhaps the most important of all the Biblical conceptions that are embedded in the fabric of Western civilization. Everything depends upon this. It is uniquely the fruit of Biblical teaching. And why is the individual important? Simply because he is made in the image of God; he is a beneficiary of the blood of Christ, and an heir of everlasting life. Take away the spiritual significance of the individual as revealed in the Bible, and he immediately becomes a thing of no particular value, a pawn of the state, with no more cosmic significance than a pig or a shovel full of coal, whose destiny is to be worked to death, degraded, or destroyed at the whim of godless masters. The recent Nazi dictator, Adolph Hitler flung a banner across the streets of Munich in which it was declared that "The State is Everything; The Individual is Nothing!" If you and your generation desire any continuing rights of yourselves and your children to any respect as persons, then you must defend the Bible. It is the Magna Charta of every personal right and dignity. It is only in the Bible that such rights appear. Only there are they safe. Thank God, that by means of the Bible, we still stand within the tradition of the Christian value-judgment of the supreme importance of the individual.

The value-judgment that humility is better than strutting power derives from only one source, from Him who said, "Whosoever shall

humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4) and again, "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted." (Matthew 23:12). In the words of Christ, one not only finds the ethical foundation of all human service, which is grounded in humility, but also the motivation for it, namely, that God will in due time exalt the humble. Take the motivation away, and no true humility is possible.

TRYING TO RETAIN VALUES APART FROM THEIR ROOTS

The sadness of our troubled generation is compounded by the fact that although the ancient value-judgments revealed in God's word, the Bible, are still held to be desirable, *the establishment* of those virtues in their Biblical roots has been weakened by man's perversity in rejecting the Bible. Today we are witnesses of a rather ludicrous circus-act in which humanity thinks it can preserve the foundation ethics of world order, such as those we have mentioned, revealed in the Bible and deriving their strength therefrom, by a kind of bootstrap operation in which men fancy they can keep alive the flowers of a Christian society, altogether separated from their Biblical roots. Thus, ours has been denominated a "cut-flower" civilization by Dr. D. Elton Trueblood in a remarkably perceptive book written fifteen years ago. Not only is it impossible so to do, but eventually the very value-judgments themselves will be corrupted and rejected altogether, just as withered flowers are thrown in the garbage when they have perished apart from their roots.

PLEA FOR RETURN TO THE BIBLE

Therefore, seeing that all we hold most dear and beneficial to ourselves and all mankind derives from the Bible and the Bible only, we should rally to the ramparts as advocates and defenders of that wisdom which is first pure and then peaceable. We should not be ashamed of the Bible. It is still the Light of all nations; and, as Robert Payne Smith said, "The books of men have their day and grow obsolete; God's word is like Himself, the same yesterday, today, and forever."

John Wesley said, "I am a *Bible Bigot*; I follow it in all things!" God give us more of that kind of bigots. Wesley stirred the conscience of two continents because he was a Bible bigot; but my generation let itself be seduced into believing that a bigot was something terrible! But, before you throw away the Bible bigotry that underlies the whole structure of ordered society, you had better take another look at what you will get in the place of it. You will get the wild heresies of the *God is dead* sect. You will get the godless orgies of the New Morality. You will get the return of the Medieval Church. You will get the soulless apathy of the welfare state. You will reap the whirlwind of red death called communism.

In this address, we have only skimmed the surface. The influence of the Bible in America, and indeed in the whole world, as T. H. Darrow put it belongs to those elemental things, like "the sky and the wind and the sea, like bread and wine, like the kisses of little children, and like tears shed by the grave — which can never grow stale or out of date."

In conclusion, I share with you what some of the great thinkers of history have said concerning the Bible:

SIR WALTER SCOTT:

"Within that awful volume lies
The mystery of mysteries!
Happiest they of human race,
To whom God has granted grace
To read, to fear, to hope, to pray,
To lift the latch and force the way;
And better had they ne'er been born,
Who read to doubt, or read to scorn."

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

"We search the world for truth; we cull
The good, the pure, the beautiful,
From all old flower-fields of the soul;
And, weary seekers of the best,
We come laden from our quest,
To find that all the sages said
Is in the book our mothers' read!"

JOHN DRYDEN

"Whence, but from heaven, could men unskilled
in arts,
In several ages born, in several parts,
Weave such agreeing truths? Or how, or why
Should all conspire to cheat us with a lie?
Unasked their pains, ungrateful their advice.
Starving their gain, and martyrdom their price!"

Then let America acknowledge that its inheritance is Biblical, that its every virtue as a nation is not self-created, but *derived* from the Word of God. May we be ashamed, not of the Bible, but of those evil persons in our society who would destroy the Bible or diminish its rightful place in our lives and the life of our nation. May we rise up and say to the hosts of wickedness, "You shall not pass!" May we pray the prayer of Rudyard Kipling, penned on the occasion of Victoria's Jubilee:

"God of the nations, be with us yet;
Lest we forget; lest we forget!"

CENTRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST

4100 MONTROSE BLVD.

HOUSTON, TEXAS 77006