

# Biblical Faith And American History

by R. J. Rushdoony

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# Biblical Faith and American History

by R. J. Rushdoony

## The Past

Biblical faith, *first* of all, begins with the sovereign God Who, in His grace and mercy, redeems man through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Because God is sovereign, His work of salvation is an act of sovereign grace. Anything short of this is not scriptural: it is another religion, whatever its ostensibly Christian form. Jesus Christ cannot be our Savior if He is not Lord.

*Second*, because God is the total and sovereign God, our faith cannot be only a spiritual concern. The totally sovereign God is Lord over every aspect of life. All things are created, predestined, governed, and judged by Him. As a result, the Bible legislates concerning every area of life: church, state, school, family, science, the arts, economics, vocations, things spiritual, and things material. Neoplatonism, however, regarded the material world as low and irrelevant to religion. As a result, wherever neoplatonism is in evidence, Christian faith is reduced to a spiritual religion.

## Neoplatonism in the Church

St. Augustine, to whom the church owes so much for his emphasis on God's predestination, was inconsistent as he turned from God to the world. His neoplatonism took over, and he surrendered the world and history to the enemy. The work of the Christian was substantially reduced to soul-saving. As Tuveson wrote of Augustine, "He viewed religion as essentially an individual experience, an immediate transforming contact of the soul with divine truth and grace."<sup>1</sup> This emphasis, in Augustine and in all his successors to the present, led to a re-reading of the Bible as a book of spiritual comfort for the soul. Whether interpreting the laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, or the Book of Revelation, everything was spiritualized and made a message for the soul. The colors used in the tabernacle, and the numbers cited in

prophecies, came to have spiritual messages of great import, whereas the very obvious meanings were by-passed as carnal, and intended for a carnal generation.

Augustine, by his emphasis on God's predestination, was a major influence on the Reformation and a father thereof. However, because of his neoplatonic elements, he was also the father of the Roman Catholic Church, and of fundamentalism, Lutheranism, and amillennial Calvinism. Because the material world was only a vale of darkness for the soul to pass through, the church came to be the only truly Christian institution and was exalted even as the state, family, and much else were downgraded. We fail to remember that very early the church, under the influence of neoplatonism, came to regard the family with distrust as a low and carnal domain.

Augustine's influence on eschatology prevailed for a thousand years, and is again with us. With the decline of neoplatonism, there was a revival of postmillennialism. One of its consequences was the great age of exploration. There are many indications that the Americas were repeatedly "discovered" over the centuries, by Europeans and Asiatics, by Phoenicians and Arabs from the Middle East, by Chinese, Norsemen, and perhaps other Europeans. Nothing came of these "discoveries." The thinking of the times did not make a new land significant. Only as postmillennialism began to emerge, and with it a new sense of the Great Commission, did men set out to explore and to exercise dominion. Most of the explorers, from Columbus on, whatever their faults, did have a postmillennial and missionary motivation as well as an economic one. The economic concern, in fact, was an aspect of a renewed sense of the creation mandate to exercise dominion and to subdue the earth.

Every area of life began to be viewed in Biblical terms. Early in church history, the very strongly Hellenic Origen had castrated himself to escape the flesh, only to find that lust begins in the mind and heart of man. In the Middle Ages, the Song of Solomon was spiritualized and turned into nonsense. Puritan divines like William Gouge and others referred to it as a source of instruction in perfect married love. A favorite Puritan text was Genesis 26:8, which tells of Isaac "sporting" with his wife Rebekah. The Puritans used this text to attack stoical abstinence and sacerdotal celibacy, of which Gouge said that it was, "A

disposition no way warranted by the Word.” Thomas Gataker, in a marriage sermon of 1620, attacked the idea that Biblical faith is indifferent to things physical or disinterested in martial joys. This false picture of Biblical faith, he declared is:

An illusion of Sathan, whereby he usually perswades the merry Greekes of the world; That if they should once devote themselves to the Service of Jesus Christ, that then they must bid an everlasting farewell to all mirth and delight; that then all their merry dayes are gone; that in the kingdome of Christ, there is nothing, but sighing and groning, and fasting and prayer. But see here the contrary: even in the kingdome of Christ, and in his House, there is marrying and giving in marriage, drinking of wine, feasting, and rejoicing even in the very face of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Erasmus had spoken of marriage as being perfected in abstinence from sexual intercourse. The prominent Elizabethan Puritan Henry Smith declared that 1 Corinthians 7:3 is “(A) commandment to yield this duty (sexual intercourse), that which is commanded is lawful; and not to doe it, is a breach of the commandment.” William Whately said that neither husband nor wife can “without grievous sinne deny it” when the other wishes intercourse. Gouge spoke of marital sex as “one of the most proper and essential acts of marriage.” In Massachusetts, in the Middlesex County Court in 1666, Edmund Pinson complained that Richard Dexter had slandered him by stating that Pinson had broken his wife’s heart with grief because “that he wold be absent from her 3 weeks together when he was at home, and wold never come nere her, and such like.”<sup>3</sup>

Only a few generations previously, it was a mark of saintliness to be abstinent in marriage; now it was slander to be charged with it! The change was great and dramatic. The change, however, was not limited to marriage. In every area of life, man was to delight himself in God’s salvation, the joys of covenant life, physical and spiritual, and to move forward confidently to exercise dominion and to subdue the earth. The material world was now important because God created it, and because God required man to subdue it, exercise dominion over it, and to rejoice therein before the Lord.

## [The Mission of American Puritans](#)

American Puritanism thus self-consciously set out to establish God's New Zion on earth, and to make America the base from whence the world was to be conquered. The great missionary movement of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was one result. In 1654, Captian Edward Johnson published in London his *A History of New England, or Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour* in order to enlist Christians to colonize the new world, declaring:

Christ Jesus intending to manifest his Kingly Office toward his Churches far more fully than every yet the Sons of men saw... stirres up his servants as the Heralds of a King to make this Proclamation for Voltuntiers as followeth.

Oh yes! Oh yes! All you the people of Christ that are here Oppressed, imprisoned and scurrilously derided, gather yourselves together, your wives and little ones, in answer to your several Names as you shall be shipped for his service, in the Westerne World, and more especially for planting the united Collonies of new England; Where you are to attend the service of the King of Kings, upon the divulging of this Proclamation by his Heralds at Armes...

Could Casar so suddenly fetch over fresh forces from Europe to Asia, Pumpy to foyle? How much more shall Christ who created all power, call over this 900 league Ocean at his pleasure, such instruments as he thinks meete to make use of this place... Know this is the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth, in new Churches, and a new Commonwealth together.<sup>4</sup>

The Puritans had a blueprint for the “new Heaven, and a New Earth, in new Churches, and a new Commonwealth” which the Lord planned to build in America. This blueprint was the Bible. Tuveson has observed:

The English, it has been truly said, are the people of a book - the Bible. Not the least important result of their pre-occupation with the Word was that they, as well as their fellow Protestants in other countries, came into close contact with a philosophy of history far more sophisticated, far more universal and yet more flexible than any the great classical tradition provided.<sup>5</sup>

Even more, Americans became the people of the book, and the tremendous expansive energy of both English and Americans. The eschatological vitality of both came from the postmillennial faith which for a time dominated thinking in both countries.

### [The New Model](#)

It was not surprising, therefore, in view of the Puritan dedication to Scripture, that they looked to the Bible not only for a new model for the church but also for the state. From the very beginning, the colonies, especially in New England, looked to the Bible for their laws. Because of the royal over-lordship where colonial charters were concerned, a certain amount of English royal law was also retained to avoid conflicts with the crown. But the Puritans essentially wanted a new model, one based on Scripture, for every area of life; we have Cromwell’s New Model Army; we have new model churches; in one case after another, things were refashioned in terms of Scripture.

According to a modern fallacy, begotten of antinomianism, Scripture is only partially law, and that law can be divided into ceremonial, civil, and moral. Such a distinction, *first* of all, leaves very little of the Bible as law. *Second*, the division is artificial. The so-called ceremonial law is intensely moral: it deals with the fact of sin and God’s plan of atonement; civil law is as moral as any

law can be, since it deals with theft, murder, false witness, adultery, crime, and punishment in every form.

This fallacy does have roots in some antinomian Puritans, but the more common view of the Puritans was to view all Scripture as the law of God. The *only* kind of word the sovereign God can speak, they assumed rightly, is a sovereign word, a law-word because it is a binding word. A sovereign God cannot speak an uncertain or a tentative word. As a result, Puritans searched Scripture for guidance in every area of life, because Scripture to them was indeed God's binding and infallible word.

It should, thus, not surprise us that they turned to and used Biblical law. Not until the Cambridge Platonists introduced neoplatonism into Puritanism, and thereby hamstrung it, did they cease to show an interest in Biblical law. It was God's ordained means of building His New Zion in America and using America as a means of conquering the whole world.

The medieval preacher looked for allegories in Scripture and for non-historical and spiritual meanings. The Puritan looked for laws of living, for mandates in personal, family, church, school, state, vocational, and social living. His purpose was both practical and theological, to establish God's New Zion in America.

As a result, a characteristic complaint began to mark the American pulpit from the second generation in New England to all of America today, the jeremiad. The jeremiad is a lamentation that the nation is faithless to its covenant God. It assumes a particular responsibility by the American people to be faithful to the Lord because they have been particularly blessed by Him. Whereas in France the appeal to national renewal is humanistic and cites "the glory of France" as the impetus, in America the impetus is religious very commonly, and is theological in its concern and emphasis.

The framework of American life, thus, has been theological. We may find fault with the developments of that theology, and the departures from it, but

America's theological context is very real. Thus, whatever else we may say about *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, it clearly sees America's mission, even with, if not emphatically with, its armies to be a manifestation of God's justice and judgment. The coming of the Armies is identified with the coming of the Lord in judgment. Its chorus is a triumphant hymn of praise, a doxology: "Glory, glory, Hallelujah, Our God is marching on!" In the twentieth century, even non-Christians spoke readily and freely of "the mission of America." The Puritan current is still strong, even among those who reject it.

## [The Present](#)

We cannot begin to understand the present condition of the United States apart from the decline of the Reformed Faith. The War of Independence was a triumph for Puritan postmillennialism, but it was also a major factor in its decline. The Puritan faith suffered on two counts. *First*, because the war was so closely identified with Puritanism, and especially with Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, all Puritan pastors, of whatever church affiliation, were very active in the chaplainry. The churches suffered to a degree from this loss. *Second*, and more important, many of their churches were destroyed, deliberately burned by the British forces. This constituted a major and devastating loss to an already sometimes impoverished people. From this setback, Puritanism never fully recovered. Instead of facing people in time of peace with a commanding position, Puritanism came through the war with disastrous losses and disorganization.

At the same time as the Augustinian faith in God's decree was declining, an Augustinian despair was flourishing. Instead of the confident hope that Christ's kingdom would prevail, there was now a belief, strengthened by the French Revolution, that man, godless man, rather than Christ, would command the nations. As a result, the medieval idea that the church is man's only hope in this world, and that the church must be a convent or monastery for Christians to retreat into, captured America. The result was *revivalism*.

## [The Scourge of Revivalism](#)

With revivalism, dramatic changes took place. Alexander Hamilton, seeing the drift away from a Christian emphasis, had planned before his death to start a new political entity called the Christian Constitutional Party. With the new monastic spirit, such an idea was impossible. Politics was left to the politicians; Christians were intent upon secularizing the political order. Election sermons and the old Puritan concern with civil government now became obsolete, and even seen as evidence of *worldliness*.

The very term *worldliness* took on a monastic meaning. It did not mean an *ungodly* concern with the world, but *any* genuine concern with the world.

A similar and far-reaching change took place in education. Earlier, *all* education had been Christian; only Christian schools and colleges existed. Within a few years after revivalism began, the move for state control of education was underway. Some revivalists denounced Christian schools as ungodly. It was held that Christian schools substituted knowledge for the revival experience, and nurture for regeneration. A more clean-cut conversion experience could take place, it was held, if a person's mind was not cluttered with knowledge of the Scriptures. We should remember that, in the revival movement inaugurated by Charles G. Finney, even Bible reading in revival meetings was held to have a bad and cooling or cold-water effect on those present.

The key term and emphasis was *soul-saving*. But this is not all. The revivalists acted as though there had been virtually no souls saved until they came along, as though all who had preceded them were not pastors or shepherds, but rather wolves. Moreover, the very term *soul-saving* took on a new meaning. *Soul* in Scripture means very commonly *the life of a man*, so that Biblical soul-saving means the regeneration of the whole man. Salvation now was by implication limited to one side of a man, his soul or spirit, and salvation had an inner meaning rather than a total and cosmic meaning.

The result was a retreat from the world, and from the whole life of man, into this redefined soul. Jesus Christ as Savior was now limited in His function to

being simply a soul-savior. Not surprisingly, by the twentieth century, Rev. Carl McIntire logically insisted on denying the creation mandate, and Bob Jones University denied the Lordship of Jesus prior to the premillennial kingdom. The logic of Arminianism required a surrender of Christ's kingship and a reduction of His role to that of a Savior. Even this role was a diminished one because of the denial of sovereign grace. *Man* was in effect the savior; man chose or denied Christ; man made the decision and the decree. Predestination was transferred from God to man.

### [The Scourge of Arminianism](#)

Arminianism thus transferred the government from Christ's shoulders to man's. This means that there is no *Biblical* gospel for society, but only a humanistic or *social* gospel. Modernism was a product of revivalism, and some Arminian scholars are happy to point out that revivalism gave birth to the social gospel. *Arminian fundamentalism and the modernistic social gospel are twins born of a common parentage, the denial of sovereign grace.* Not surprisingly, there is an increasing receptivity of Arminian fundamentalism to the social gospel.

When Pilate told Jesus that His "own nation and chief priests" had delivered Him, their King (*Jn. 18:33-35*), Jesus made clear that He was not a King whose kingship came from men: "My kingdom is not of this world" (*Jn. 18:36*), *i.e.*, it is not derived *from* this world, but is *over* this world, and it is "My kingdom."

Arminianism places Christ's kingdom either in the future (the millennium) or outside this world. The Barthians, for example, insists on working for a socialist order, but they are emphatic on declaring God to be "the wholly Other," totally beyond and outside this world, so that the Kingdom of God has no real relevancy to our world today. The revivalist sees the kingdom as only in the millennium, or in the world beyond the Second Coming.

The results of such a theology are very much with us. In a country where more than half of the people are church members, this convent or monastic attitude with respect to Christ's rule has led to a surrender of the world to man. The real problem in the United States is Arminianism, which is a form of *modified unbelief*. *Arminianism proposes belief in Jesus Christ, but acts on belief in man*. The result of such a profession is exactly what we have in the United States today.

Our *central* problem is thus not open atheism nor open humanism, serious problems though both clearly are. It is false theology, Arminianism. In most Western countries, open humanism is operative, or nominal religion with tacit humanism. In the United States, it is Arminianism; while Arminianism is akin to and of the family of humanism, it is still different, and it presents a Christian façade. It is significant that from the 1950s into the 1970s, the one man in the United States who has continued to be the most significant and highly regarded public figure is the revivalist, the Rev. Billy Graham. During those same years, when a minister received the highest national status in Washington, D.C. ever accorded to any minister, the United States also suffered the most serious moral disintegration. Abortion became legal, the death penalty virtually abolished, the sexual revolution under way, socialism in rapid control, welfarism rampant, and hedonism commonplace.

The coincidence of these two factors is *not* accidental. Where men adopt so organized a surrender of the crown rights of King Jesus over the world, of necessity it must have practical consequences. The surrender of the world coincides with the growth of a false spirituality.

The U.S. Constitution, in its monetary clauses, shows clearly the influence of the Rev. John Witherspoon, whose hard money, gold standard principles have left their mark on America. Today, some pastors *denounce* interest in gold or silver, in economics, as unspiritual. The gap between Witherspoon and the present is very great, and the reason for the gap is Arminianism.

The only remedy, therefore, is the Reformed Faith, the proclamation of the sovereign God, His sovereign grace, and His sovereign law.

## The Future

Early in the twentieth century, American radicals, sharply aware of the irrelevance of the churches, caricatured their role and message savagely and sometimes blasphemously. The most popular such caricature was the hymn, "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," which became "Pies in the Sky, Bye and Bye." The fundamentalists only became more monastic, whereas the modernists adopted all the more the socialism of the radicals.

The net result was that Biblical Faith was denied by both, and the Faith made unreal. The churches grew numerically, but meanwhile declined in strength and in effectiveness. The change between even the late 1940s and the 1970s was dramatically illustrated by a nurse, who after some years of absence from nursing, returned to the hospital where she began her career. It was in a Southern city, deep in the Bible Belt, where almost everyone attended church, and most churches were fundamentalist. Earlier, emergency patients coming to the hospital prayed and asked for their pastor. In the 1970s, after two years of experience, she found only one person who even mentioned the Lord at the time of crisis. The rest were pleased the next day when their pastor called, but their professed faith was not essential to them. Because God is sovereign and absolute, our faith in Him will either govern every area of life, thought, and being, or finally He will be rejected in all. We cannot have half a God: Biblical religion is an all-or-nothing proposition. But men want the form of godliness, but not God. They attempt to use the church as a hiding place from God. St. Paul warned Timothy against all such, who are men "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 *Tim.* 3:5). The modern church, however, modernist and fundamentalist, is bent on *pleasing* all such, rather than turning away from them.

The result is cheap religion, very popular religion, because it promises heaven without any cost to man. It is antinomian religion: it requires no fruit-bearing to the Lord, no tithing, no growth, only a "decision" for Christ, Who is expected then to be grateful and mindful of man the sovereign. Such religion is like the

seed sown on stony ground, which tribulation or persecution quickly destroys (*Mt. 13:18-22*). It has a very promising present, but no future.

What then is the future for the Christian faith in America? The growing crisis in the United States, an aspect of world crisis greater than the world has ever known, is the crisis of humanism and its sister, Arminianism. The crisis created by humanism and Arminianism is now threatening to destroy both of them. Men are working to postpone the reckoning, to create stopgap solutions, and to put band-aids on the cancer of civilization, but it will not work.

Either the world will settle miserably in a Dark Age of savage character, or it will be captured by Biblical Faith. There are no alternatives.

The crisis places a great responsibility on the champions of sovereign grace. Their faith must be more than churchianity: it must rather be the declaration of the crown rights of King Jesus in every area of life. Christ the King must command the person, church, state, school, family, vocations, the arts and science and all things else. He must be served by man wherever he is and with all his heart, mind, and being.

Is this possible? Can the small numbers of sovereign grace men triumph in the face of so great an enemy? The answer is simply this: it is impossible for the sovereign God not to conquer. His purpose in all these things is to shake all things which can be shaken, so that alone will stand that which cannot be shaken (*Heb. 12:25-29*).

The Scriptures are clear, moreover, that the power of evil, however seemingly great and entrenched, is a short-term matter. David, who saw the wicked flourish and hunt him like a wild animal, still could declare, "Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about" (*Ps. 32:10*). Indeed, "The meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace" (*Ps. 37:11, c.f., c. 10*).

Asaph declares, "For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee" (Ps. 73:27). Solomon makes clear God's purpose:

For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall he cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it. (Pr. 2:21-22)

Our Lord concludes His Sermon on the Mount by declaring that every "house," *i.e.*, person, life, institution, church, or nation, which is built upon sand shall perish in the judgments which God regularly sends upon earth, whereas only the persons, institutions, and nations which are established upon the Rock, Jesus Christ Himself, shall stand the shakings and testings (Mt. 7:24-27).

We are approaching such a time of judgment. All other houses shall fall and be swept away by the winds of history and the floods of judgment. Only those who build upon Christ the Lord will endure.

This then is *a time for building*, for building on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Christian schools, churches, seminaries, political agencies, economic enterprises, vocational ventures, and much, much more must be started, wisely and carefully, but also eagerly as an opportunity for setting forth the crown rights of Christ the King.

This has already begun. In one area alone, the world is startled by our success. Christian schools are growing steadily and commanding even the children of the unbelieving. Those who a few years ago believed that the Reformed Faith was dead are now being challenged by it on all sides. New churches are appearing, and the cause of sovereign grace is rapidly expanding. We are on the verge of the greatest growth in scope and power of truly Biblical Faith which the world has ever seen.

The motto of the State of Nevada is an apt one for our cause: "Battle Born." In the parable of the sower, the heat of the sun, adversity, causes the false seed to perish, because of the stony ground of their being. Adversity only strengthens the godly. Battle born, they grow in adversity and become strong men in Christ. The future thus is our's in Christ, because "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (*Ps. 24:1*). We are fighting on home ground under the Sovereign Lord of all creation. We are battle born, fighting on home ground, under Christ the King. With St. Paul we must say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (*Rom. 8:31*)

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millenium and Utopia* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith (1964), 1972), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Gataker and William Bradshaw, *Two Marriage Sermons* (London, 1620), 14, cited by Roland M. Frye, "The Teaching of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love," in Arnold Stein, ed., *On Milton's Poetry* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1970). 104.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105f.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Bushnell Hart, *American History Told by Contemporaries*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 366f.

<sup>5</sup> Tuveson, *op. cit.*, 4.