



NATIONAL GARDEN OF THE FOUNDERS

STATION 9

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

*Conscience, Covenant, and the Road
to American Liberty*

THE BIBLE OPENED | CONSCIENCE AWAKENED | RULERS CAME UNDER LAW



1517 | 1791

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

2 CORINTHIANS 3:17

FAITH

MORALITY

LAW

EDUCATION

LIBERTY

STATION OVERVIEW

The Protestant Reformation

Conscience, Covenant, and the Road to American Liberty

FIRST SPARK

Picture a crowded marketplace in 1517. Johann Tetzel has arrived with a cross, banners, a sermon, and a wooden chest. He tells anxious listeners that an indulgence can lessen punishment connected with sin. A husband thinks of his dead wife. A laborer feels the few coins in his hand. Metal strikes the bottom of the chest, and a promise of mercy has begun to sound like a sale. A few miles away in Wittenberg, Martin Luther hears what people are being taught. As a pastor and professor, he fears that a printed certificate is replacing repentance, faith, and trust in Christ. He also sees money leaving poor households for a campaign tied to church finance. Luther takes up his pen. In ninety-five short propositions, he asks what forgiveness is, who may promise it, and whether giving to a needy neighbor is better than buying an indulgence. His challenge begins as an argument about repentance and the Gospel, but the questions quickly grow. Who may bind a conscience? May an office silence an argument without answering it? Must a ruler obey a higher law? Should ordinary people read Scripture for themselves? Those questions travel through printing shops, churches, schools, refugee communities, colonial covenants, pulpits, legislatures, and constitutional conventions. A marketplace dispute becomes the first scene on a long road to American liberty.



FAITH



MORALITY



LAW



EDUCATION



LIBERTY

FOUNDATION

The Reformation was one great tributary flowing into American liberty. English common law and Magna Carta, ancient and medieval ideas of natural law, classical republicanism, Enlightenment philosophy, colonial self-government, and hard political experience also fed the river. The strongest history does not erase those streams. It shows where they met.

GOSPEL TRUTH

The Reformers first spoke of freedom as freedom from sin, guilt, and the attempt to earn salvation. Political consequences followed, but the Gospel claim came first: no prince, priest, parliament, or payment can do what belongs to Christ alone.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

JOHN 8:32 (KJV)

CONTRIBUTIONS

The Reformation helped cultivate a culture in which Scripture stood above every merely human office; conscience could not be manufactured by force; ordinary people should read and test claims; civil authority was an office of trust; rulers and people bore mutual duties; fallen human beings needed accountable institutions; and education equipped people for both faithfulness and self-government.

GARDEN THREAD

The printing press made reform portable. Atlantic migration carried reforming communities westward. In America, inherited ideas were tested in towns, charters, classrooms, pulpits, petitions, legislatures, and conventions. Follow the road from Wittenberg to Worms, from Geneva and Scotland to Plymouth and Providence, and from Nassau Hall and Williamsburg to Philadelphia.



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The Station Map

A guide to the reformers, records, stories, and American connections in this station.



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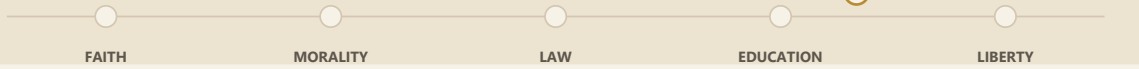
MEMORY LINE

The Reformation opened the Bible, awakened conscience, and taught that rulers too stand under law.



STATION 9 / 01

THE BIG IDEA



The Reformation did not begin with a plan for a republic. It began with a question about the Gospel.

That distinction matters. If we make Luther into an eighteenth-century democrat or republican, or Calvin into an architect secretly sketching the United States Constitution, we lose the real story. The Reformers lived amid emperors, princes, and established churches. Their work began in that world and opened questions later generations carried much farther.

Yet their theological struggle changed the questions Europeans were prepared to ask. If Scripture may judge a pope, may a higher law also judge a king? If faith requires conviction, can belief be commanded by a magistrate? If Christians stand equal before God, what does office mean? If rulers and people bear covenant duties, what happens when a ruler breaks trust? If every household should know God's Word, how widely must education spread?

Ideas moved from a reformer's desk through generations of debate, books, sermons, schools, churches, and civic experiments before they reached the American founding. Luther emphasized Scripture and the liberty of faith. Calvin treated civil government as a God-given but bounded office and allowed designated magistrates to oppose royal tyranny. Protestants facing civil conflict developed fuller arguments about covenant and resistance. Congregations practiced election and written agreement. Dissenters carried the case for conscience farther still.

America became one of the places where those arguments met.

The Clearest Founder Evidence

In 1765, eleven years before independence, John Adams looked backward and named the Reformation as a turning point. He wrote that God raised champions who began and conducted it. Then came his bridge to America:

FOUNDING VOICE

"From the time of the reformation, to the first settlement of America, knowledge gradually spread in Europe, but especially in England."

JOHN ADAMS, *A DISSERTATION ON THE CANON AND THE FEUDAL LAW*, 1765

As knowledge spread, Adams wrote, "ecclesiastical and civil tyranny" lost strength. He did not claim one cause. "It was not religion alone," he carefully added, but also "a love of universal Liberty" that peopled America.

That is this station's central claim: the Reformation helped form the people, practices, questions, and moral language from which America's founding documents emerged.

SOURCES

26, 34, and 35.

The Gospel Purpose

Christian liberty is not permission to do whatever we please. Luther's first great liberty was the sinner's freedom from condemnation through Christ. That freedom turns outward in love. The conscience is not sovereign; it answers to God and truth. The magistrate is not sovereign over the soul; civil office has limits.

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

GALATIANS 5:13 (KJV)

Freedom therefore stands between two errors: tyranny from above and license from within. The Christian citizen resists both.

SOURCES

1, 6, and 7.



STATION 9 / 02

FROM WITTENBERG TO PHILADELPHIA

FAITH

MORALITY

LAW

EDUCATION

LIBERTY

How the Influence Traveled

- Wittenberg**
 Scripture challenges purchased grace and unanswerable authority.
- Worms**
 Conscience, bound to Scripture and evident reason, stands before emperor and empire.
- The printing cities**
 Bibles and arguments multiply faster than officials can suppress them.
- Geneva, France, Scotland, and the Netherlands**
 Reformers debate magistracy, covenant, obedience, and lawful resistance.
- The Atlantic colonies**
 Congregations, towns, and provinces write compacts, elect officers, found schools, and struggle with religious difference.
- Boston, Princeton, Williamsburg, and Richmond**
 Clergymen, teachers, lawyers, and legislators translate inherited ideas into arguments about rights and public virtue.
- Philadelphia**
 A federal Constitution bars religious tests, and the First Amendment protects free exercise while denying Congress power to establish a national religion.

The path is not a row of falling dominoes. It is a braided road through books, institutions, migration, suffering, correction, argument, and experience.

IDEAS TRAVEL • PEOPLE CARRY THEM • FREEDOM GROWS

Scripture
Conscience
Print
Peoples
Self-Government
Liberty

DIFFERENT PEOPLES
A SHARED PURSUIT
A MORE HUMANE WORLD

IDEAS
PEOPLES
INSTITUTIONS
A MORE FREE TOMORROW

DEEPER ROOTS
BRIGHTER HORIZONS

MANY STRANDS
A STRONGER TOMORROW

THEOLOGY
LAW
POLITICS
EDUCATION

WE THE PEOPLE



STATION 9 / 03

FAITH



The Word Above the Powerful

The Reformation's first liberty was not political independence. It was the sinner's freedom to receive salvation as God's gift. But when reformers insisted that God's Word could judge the most powerful offices on earth, a political question waited nearby: if no church leader is above truth, why should any ruler be above law?

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

ROMANS 10:17 (KJV)

Story 1 - The Pardon Seller and the Monk

A procession enters a German town. At its center is Johann Tetzel, a gifted preacher sent to promote indulgences. A cross is raised. A chest is set in view. Families gather because the subject is urgent: sin, punishment, and the fate of loved ones who have died. Tetzel's message makes an indulgence certificate feel like something a coin can secure.

Charles Carleton Coffin turns that world into a lively scene in *The Story of Liberty*. In his telling, a man buys an indulgence for a robbery he plans to commit. He later robs Tetzel and presents the paper as his pardon. The tale captures the moral shock at the heart of the controversy: what happens when a paper promise seems to excuse sin before it is even committed?

In Wittenberg, Martin Luther hears parishioners speak as though their certificates have settled everything. He is a monk, professor, and pastor who has wrestled deeply with guilt and grace. The reports trouble him. If people trust a purchase instead of repentance and Christ, he believes their souls are being misled. If scarce household money goes into a chest while a neighbor needs bread, Christian mercy has been turned upside down.

Luther answers with the Ninety-Five Theses. Thesis 32 warns anyone who treats a letter of pardon as assurance of salvation. Thesis 36 says that a truly repentant Christian receives remission even without such a letter. Thesis 43 goes directly to the marketplace choice: giving to the poor or lending to the needy is better than purchasing an indulgence.

On October 31, 1517, Luther sends the theses to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and calls for debate. Then the printing press takes over. Printers copy the Latin text, translators put it into German, and sheets pass from hand to hand. A local protest races across Europe before Luther can guide its course.

The first spark is the question Luther places before the public: Can an office sell what belongs to God, and can authority answer honest argument with anything less than truth?

STORY LESSON

Liberty's road began when grace was separated from money and religious claims were opened to examination.

SOURCES

2, 3, 4, 36, 37, and 40.



FAITH / SUPPORTING STORIES

Conscience and the Printed Word



Story 2 - A Conscience Before an Empire

Four years later, Luther rides into the imperial city of Worms. Crowds press near the road. Inside the assembly hall wait princes, church officials, and the young Emperor Charles V. Luther's books have been stacked where everyone can see them. The question is simple: Are these yours, and will you take back what you wrote?

Luther asks for time. He spends the night weighing the demand, then returns to the hall. He does not claim that every private feeling is true. He says his conscience must answer to Scripture and clear reason:

"Unless I am convicted by testimony of Scripture or by evident reason ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Therefore I cannot and will not recant."

MARTIN LUTHER AT THE DIET OF WORMS, 1521

Luther's conscience is not a throne for personal preference. It is captive, bound to what he believes God has revealed and open to evident reason. Yet the scene announces that an institution cannot simply command inward assent. Authority must answer truth with truth.

The Edict of Worms condemned Luther, prohibited his writings, and ordered that no one print, possess, buy, or sell them. The edict reveals why the moment mattered. If books could be forbidden and conscience compelled by decree, then control of doctrine and control of public thought stood very close together.

Generations of Protestants remember Worms as a picture of conscience refusing to surrender merely because earthly power demands it. The scene becomes a lasting part of the moral imagination that crosses the Atlantic.

STORY LESSON

Conscience is not a license to invent truth; it is the duty to obey truth above intimidation.

SOURCES 5 and 35.

Story 3 - The Book Hidden in Cloth

Across the Channel, William Tyndale dreamed of an English Bible ordinary people could understand. Denied support in England, he worked on the Continent. In 1526, printers at Worms produced his New Testament from Greek into English.

The books were small enough to hide. Copies traveled down the Rhine, disappeared into bales of cloth, crossed the water, and entered England as contraband. Officials bought and burned them. Readers wore them out. Only a few copies of the 1526 edition survive.

Tyndale did not survive. Betrayed near Antwerp, he was executed for heresy in 1536. Yet his language outlived the stake. Large portions of his translation later passed into the King James Bible, whose cadences filled colonial homes, churches, schools, speeches, and political arguments.

A vernacular Bible did more than increase private devotion. It trained readers to compare a sermon with a text, a law with a moral command, and a ruler's claim with a standard beyond the ruler. Protestant readers disagreed intensely, and their debates weakened the idea that one human authority could permanently close every question.

The plowboy, craft worker, mother, apprentice, and child became people who should know the text rather than receive every conclusion secondhand.

STORY LESSON

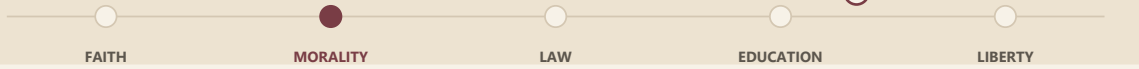
When people can read the standard for themselves, authority must increasingly explain rather than merely command.

SOURCES 8, 9, and 40.



STATION 9 / 04

MORALITY



Free in Christ, Bound in Love

Political liberty cannot survive as appetite without restraint. Luther's best-known treatment of freedom joined two sentences that seem to collide. Their tension became one of Protestantism's richest moral inheritances.

"As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God."

1 PETER 2:16 (KJV)

Story 4 - The Freest Lord and the Dutiful Servant

In 1520, Luther sits down to explain what Christian freedom means. Europe is alive with argument, his books are spreading, and the word *liberty* can easily sound like permission to cast off every duty. He begins *The Freedom of a Christian* with a paradox:

"A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one."

MARTIN LUTHER, *THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN*, 1520

The first sentence lifts a burden. God's favor is not purchased through works or controlled by an earthly intermediary. In Christ, the believer is free. The second sentence points toward the door. Freedom is meant to move outward in love. A person released from trying to earn salvation can give time, courage, goods, and care to a neighbor.

Luther is writing first about spiritual and moral liberty. In a separate work on temporal authority, he draws a boundary around the civil ruler. Earthly government reaches life, property, and outward affairs, he says, but God permits no one but himself to rule the soul.

Imagine the teaching moving from a reformer's page into homes and congregations: liberty and duty belong together. Later Americans will express that union through several traditions, including classical republicanism, natural law, English history, and Enlightenment ethics. Protestant churches add a repeated lesson of their own: people fit for freedom must practice self-command, truthfulness, stewardship, courage, and love of neighbor.

STORY LESSON

Christian liberty is not the absence of obligation. It is the power to serve without slavery to fear or selfish desire.

SOURCES

6, 7, and 35.



STATION 9 / 05

LAW



Rulers Under Covenant

Medieval Europe already possessed legal restraints, representative bodies, natural-law traditions, and charters such as Magna Carta. The Reformation added urgent arguments about covenant, office, conscience, obedience, and the fallibility of rulers to that inheritance.

"For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."

ROMANS 13:1 (KJV)

The Reformers read Romans 13 as a command to respect lawful government. The hard question was what to do when the officer ordained to punish wrong became the wrongdoer.

Story 6 - Calvin Places a Guardrail Around Kings

In Geneva, John Calvin bends over the pages of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He believes government is ordained by God to preserve justice and order, so he urges obedience to lawful magistrates. But he also knows that power can wander from its purpose. He favors arrangements in which several rulers can "mutually assist, instruct, and admonish each other."

Near the end of his discussion, Calvin turns to officers he calls "magistrates of the people." Their public duty is to restrain royal willfulness. If they watch a king oppress the weak and remain silent, he writes, they betray "the liberty of the people" placed in their care.

Calvin is speaking to lawful officers who already hold responsibility, not calling every angry individual into revolt. His focus is office, duty, and accountability. That carefully placed guardrail gives later Reformed thinkers a vital question: What must a magistrate do when a supreme ruler violates covenant and law?

Across generations, the answer grows. If political office exists for the people's protection, strength alone cannot make injustice right. Calvin's treatment of magistrates helps later writers describe government as a trust with purposes, boundaries, and guardians who must act when power breaks faith.

STORY LESSON

Authority is legitimate because it serves justice; office does not turn wrongdoing into law.

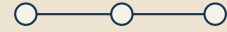
SOURCES

10, 11, and 35.



LAW / SUPPORTING STORIES

Trustees, Covenants, and Consent



Story 7 - From the People, Beneath the Law

In 1556, English Protestant bishop John Ponet opens a dangerous question: Where does a ruler's authority come from? His answer is unusually direct for his age. Kings, princes, and governors, he writes, have authority "of the people." Government exists to protect the commonwealth, and a ruler who destroys that purpose can forfeit his trust.

Two centuries later, John Adams finds Ponet's book and recognizes the argument. He praises it for containing "all the essential principles of liberty" later enlarged by Algernon Sidney and John Locke. A Reformation-era writer has entered a founder's political library by name.

The argument keeps moving. In 1579, a book published under the name "Junius Brutus" asks whether people must obey rulers who defy God and ruin the commonwealth. *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, a defense of liberty against tyrants, describes one covenant among God, king, and people and another between king and people. "It was the people who made the king," the treatise declares, "and not the king the people." The community acts through its estates, officers, and representative magistrates.

John Knox in Scotland and Samuel Rutherford's later *Lex, Rex* add their voices. The Dutch Act of Abjuration of 1581 declares that a prince exists for his subjects and becomes a tyrant through persistent oppression. Long before 1776, Atlantic Protestants are asking whether every public office rests upon public trust.

STORY LESSON

Resistance theory grew from the claim that rulers are trustees beneath law, not owners above it.

SOURCES

14, 15, 16, 17, 26, and 35.

Story 8 - A Covenant on a Rolling Ship

November winds rock the *Mayflower* off Cape Cod. The passengers have reached a coast north of the territory named in their patent, and uncertainty spreads below deck. Before anyone goes ashore, forty-one adult men gather around a short agreement.

They write that, "in the Presence of God and one another," they will "covenant and combine" into a "civil Body Politick." They promise to make "just and equal Laws" for "the general Good" and to obey the laws they make together. They still call themselves loyal subjects of King James, but they meet an immediate danger by forming civil order through mutual promise.

The word *covenant* is familiar to Separatist believers. They form a church by pledged agreement, with members and officers bound to shared duties. Now that habit moves into civic life. People bind themselves, create offices, and accept laws directed toward a common good.

The Compact is brief because the shore is waiting and survival demands action. Its lasting power lies in the scene itself: before building houses, the passengers build a political promise.

STORY LESSON

Self-government begins with mutual obligation - people accepting both a voice in law and a duty beneath it.

SOURCES

18, 34, and 35.



LAW / SUPPORTING STORY

Consent Becomes a Governing Practice



Story 9 - Free Consent Beside the Connecticut River

On May 31, 1638, the General Court gathers in Hartford and hears the Reverend Thomas Hooker preach about choosing magistrates. A listener's pen preserves a remarkable proposition:

"The foundation of authority is laid, firstly, in the free consent of people."

THOMAS HOOKER SERMON NOTES, 1638

Hooker's hearers believe God ordains civil government. His point concerns the human placement of office: the people choose magistrates and can define the powers they entrust to them.

Seven months later, the freemen of Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield adopt the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. The preamble invokes divine providence, Scripture, peace, and the liberty of the Gospel. Then the document becomes wonderfully practical. It provides for annual elections, town deputies, regular procedures, and a General Court able to make and repeal laws. If a governor refuses to call a needed court, the freemen have a way to call it.

Hooker's sermon and the Orders now stand beside one another. Free consent, election, representation, written limits, and accountability move from spoken principle into public practice.

STORY LESSON

Covenant became constitutional when communities wrote down who could govern, how officers were chosen, and where power stopped.

SOURCES

19, 34, and 35.

1

COVENANT

2

ELECTION

3

REPRESENTATION

4

WRITTEN LIMITS

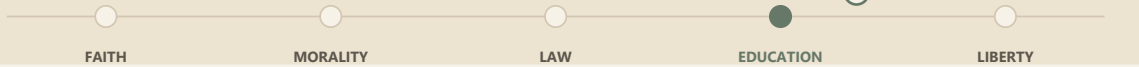
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ACCOUNTABILITY



STATION 9 / 06

EDUCATION



A Reading People Can Question Power

Once reformers demanded that ordinary Christians know Scripture, ignorance became more than a private disadvantage. It became a public danger. A community that expected people to discern truth, choose officers, keep covenants, and hold rulers accountable needed readers.

"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding."

PROVERBS 4:7 (KJV)

Story 10 - The Schoolmaster Against the Old Deluder

In 1647, Massachusetts lawmakers look at a colony of scattered towns and see a public danger: children who cannot read. They describe ignorance in deliberately theological language. It has been the work of "that old deluder, Satan" to keep people from knowledge of the Scriptures, formerly by keeping them "in an unknown tongue."

Their remedy was a school.

A town with fifty households was to appoint someone to teach children to read and write. A town with one hundred households was to establish a grammar school capable of preparing young people for the university.

The chain of thought is plain: Scripture should be known; knowledge requires literacy; literacy requires institutions; the welfare of both "church and commonwealth" depends upon learning. Families, churches, apprenticeships, private teachers, local custom, civic needs, and European precedents all help carry the work.

This is one of the Reformation's clearest American consequences. A Bible translated for the household helped create a school expected in the town. That school prepared not only ministers, but clerks, merchants, lawyers, legislators, and voters able to read laws and arguments.

STORY LESSON

A free society needs citizens who can examine a claim, remember a covenant, and read the law that governs them.

SOURCES

8, 9, 20, 34, and 35.



EDUCATION / SUPPORTING STORIES

From Household Bible to Founding Classroom



Story 11 - The Bible in a Pilgrim's Hand

In 1560, English reformers living in Geneva lift the first complete copies of a new English Bible from the press. It is compact enough for a household, clear enough for family reading, divided into verses, and filled with notes. Before the King James Bible gradually replaces it, the Geneva Bible becomes a treasured companion of many Puritans and Separatists.

Imagine one of those Bibles wrapped for an Atlantic voyage. When the cover opens in a colonial home, parents and children enter stories of covenant, deliverance, law, judges, kings, prophets, exile, and restoration. In church, sermons connect those stories to the duties of communities and rulers. At the table, a reader can follow a verse and then study the note beside it.

The shared text gives a governor, minister, parent, child, craft worker, and laborer a common world of words. They may argue over its meaning, but they can enter the argument. Phrases learned in childhood later rise again in petitions, sermons, speeches, and public documents.

The Bible in a Pilgrim's hand helps form an imagination able to judge public power within a moral story larger than the state.

STORY LESSON

A text shared across households can become a common language for testing both private character and public power.

SOURCES

8, 9, 18, 20, and 34.

Story 12 - The Scotsman in Nassau Hall

When John Witherspoon arrived from Scotland in 1768 to lead the College of New Jersey, students placed a small light in every window of Nassau Hall. He brought his family, a Reformed Presbyterian inheritance, an Edinburgh education, and hundreds of books.

Witherspoon taught theology, history, rhetoric, moral philosophy, and political thought. He did not seal students inside one intellectual school. His Princeton joined Reformed Christianity with Scottish Enlightenment learning, classical sources, common-law traditions, and vigorous debate.

Among his students is James Madison, who graduates in 1771 and remains for further study. Nine Princeton alumni later attend the Constitutional Convention; five have been Witherspoon's students. The classroom forms a real institutional bridge from the Scottish Reformed world to American statesmanship.

On May 17, 1776, Witherspoon preached that America's cause was "the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature." He warned that civil and religious liberty could not easily be separated:

FOUNDING VOICE

"There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire."

JOHN WITHERSPOON, *THE DOMINION OF PROVIDENCE*, 1776

Weeks later he entered the Continental Congress. He became the only clergyman and college president to sign the Declaration of Independence.

STORY LESSON

Ideas reach constitutions through teachers, students, books, debate, and the lifelong work of turning principle into practice.

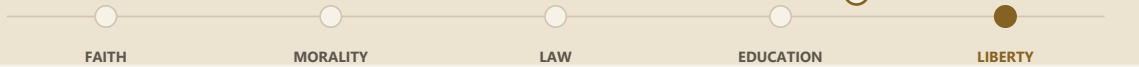
SOURCES

28, 29, and 35.



STATION 9 / 07

LIBERTY



From Defended Conscience to a Protected Right

The first Reformers defended conscience. Later Protestants carried the principle farther, especially dissenters who understood from experience how precious protection could be. Their appeals helped shape America's strong tradition of religious liberty.

"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth."

ROMANS 14:4 (KJV)

Story 13 - The Banished Minister's Lively Experiment

Snow lies across the New England woods when Roger Williams leaves Massachusetts. The colony has banished him for teachings its leaders consider dangerous, including his belief that civil magistrates should preserve public order but leave worship and doctrine to conscience. He walks into winter without a settled home.

A Wampanoag hunting party is believed to have found Williams and brought him to Massasoit, who shelters him through the brutal winter. In spring, Williams crosses into Narragansett country, negotiates with the sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi, and begins a settlement beside Narragansett Bay. He names it Providence, grateful for God's care. There he helps build a community where civil peace does not depend on everyone worshiping in the same way.

In 1644, Williams carries the argument into print with *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*. Forced uniformity, he writes, produces violated conscience, hypocrisy, persecution, and civil conflict. His protection reaches far beyond his own convictions to consciences he calls "Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian."

Williams makes his case from Christian belief. Genuine faith cannot be created by a sword, and civil officers have not been given rule over the soul. Nearly twenty years later, Rhode Island's charter of 1663 names the colony a "lively experiment": a flourishing civil state may stand "with a full liberty in religious concernments."

The winter traveler has helped turn a dissenter's plea into the governing promise of a colony. Rhode Island will test before the world whether strong faith, religious variety, and civil order can live together.

STORY LESSON

Liberty of conscience became durable when it moved from a dissenter's plea into a governing charter.

SOURCES

21, 22, 34, and 35.



LIBERTY / SUPPORTING STORIES

Experiments, Petitions, and Equal Right



Story 14 - Penn Makes the People a Party

William Penn knows the sound of a prison door. His Quaker preaching has brought punishment in England, and the experience shapes the colony he plans across the Atlantic. He imagines a place where conscience is secure and the people take part in making the laws.

"Any Government is free to the People ... where the Laws rule, and the People are a Party to those Laws."

WILLIAM PENN, *FRAME OF GOVERNMENT OF PENNSYLVANIA*, 1682

The same year, Pennsylvania's Great Law calls God the "only Lord of Conscience." Peaceable residents who acknowledge one Almighty God are not to be troubled for conscientious persuasion or forced to attend or support worship against their minds. Penn places two ideas side by side: government is free where law rules with the people's participation, and religion is genuine where conscience is not compelled.

He names his capital Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. Its streets are laid out in a generous grid between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, with public squares and room for a varied people to build. Over the following decades, Quakers, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Reformed Christians, Jews, and others make the city a busy place of worship, printing, trade, and debate.

That civic habit matters. Philadelphia becomes the meeting place of the First and Second Continental Congresses, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitutional Convention. In the city Penn founded, Americans from different colonies, denominations, and interests learn to deliberate under one roof.

STORY LESSON

Civil liberty and religious liberty grew together when rulers were placed beneath law and conscience outside coercion.

SOURCES

23, 34, and 35.

Story 15 - The Baptist Petition Meets Madison

Isaac Backus knows religious establishment from the receiving end. New England Baptists can be taxed to support Congregational churches, and a family that refuses may lose property. Backus responds by traveling, preaching, organizing, and gathering names. In 1773 he publishes *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*. Religion, he says, is voluntary obedience to God, and force cannot create it.

The next year, Backus brings the complaint to delegates meeting for the First Continental Congress. The cause keeps moving from local meetings to public petitions and from a request for toleration toward a claim of equal right.

In Virginia, the same struggle reaches James Madison. George Mason's 1776 draft declaration speaks of toleration. Madison helps strengthen it into equality: "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." In 1785, when lawmakers consider a tax for Christian teachers, Madison writes his *Memorial and Remonstrance*. Conscience is unalienable, he argues, because duty to the Creator comes before the claims of civil society.

Madison does not write alone. Eighty petitions reach the legislature with thousands of signatures from several denominations. Baptist and Presbyterian organizing gives public force to a principle Madison states with constitutional precision.

STORY LESSON

A principle becomes public liberty when ordinary people organize, petition, and persuade lawmakers to place it beyond majority control.

SOURCES

24, 30, 31, 34, and 48.



LIBERTY / THE AMERICAN SETTLEMENT

From Richmond to Philadelphia



Story 16 - Conscience Becomes Constitutional Law

Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs differed sharply from Luther's, Calvin's, or Witherspoon's. Yet his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom opened with a theological assertion:

FOUNDING VOICE

"Almighty God hath created the mind free."

THOMAS JEFFERSON, VIRGINIA BILL FOR ESTABLISHING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The bill rejected coerced worship because force produces hypocrisy and meanness, because fallible rulers may establish their own opinions as the only true ones, and because truth can prevail through free argument. Virginia adopted the statute in 1786.

Then came Philadelphia. The 1787 Constitution created no national church and required "no religious Test" for federal office. In 1789, Madison explained that a proposed amendment would prevent Congress from establishing religion or compelling anyone to worship contrary to conscience. Ratified in 1791, the First Amendment barred laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise.

This is the clearest Wittenberg-to-Philadelphia bridge: a dispute over coerced belief became, across generations, a constitutional limit on coercive power.

STORY LESSON

Conscience became an American liberty when the law denied the national government authority to command faith.

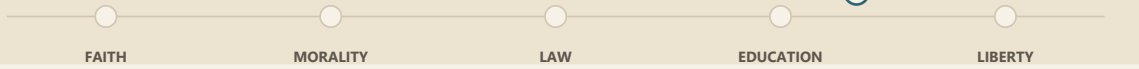
SOURCES

30, 31, 32, 33, and 34.



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FOUNDERS IN THE REFORMATION'S WORLD



The phrase "products of the Reformation" is useful when it describes the world that formed the founders. The colonies' dominant churches, colleges, sermons, Bible reading, public fasts, dissenting movements, and arguments over establishment were heirs of the Reformation. The founders brought varied religious backgrounds to that shared world. They included Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Baptists, and a Roman Catholic.

Most therefore encountered politics inside a culture already changed by the Reformation, even when they disagreed with Reformation theology. Their own words provide better evidence than modern percentage slogans.

SOURCES

26, 34, 35, 42, and 45.

American Echo 1 - John Adams Names the Road

In 1765, news of Parliament's Stamp Act runs through the colonies. In Massachusetts, a young lawyer named John Adams takes up his pen for the *Boston Gazette*. Before arguing about a tax stamp, he looks far back into history.

Adams sees two old systems that have often worked together to keep people submissive: unchecked church authority and feudal power. Both depend upon ignorance. Then he reaches the turning point. "From the time of the reformation, to the first settlement of America," he writes, "knowledge gradually spread in Europe, but especially in England."

Picture the road Adams describes. Reformers open Scripture. Printers multiply books. Readers compare claims. Families cross the Atlantic carrying both faith and a love of liberty. As knowledge spreads, Adams says, "ecclesiastical and civil tyranny" loses strength. Then he writes the line that makes his testimony so important to this station: "It was this great struggle, that peopled America."

Adams explains that religion and liberty traveled together. The settlers were moved by faith, and also by "a love of universal Liberty" and a deep hatred of domination joined to ignorance. He sees several causes meeting in one migration.

In 1813, Adams looks back on the common ground that had united Americans. Recalling a religiously varied assembly of young Philadelphians, he writes that they had been educated in "the general Principles of Christianity" and "the general Principles of English and American Liberty." Those principles, he adds, had united American parties strongly enough to "assert and maintain" independence.

STORY LESSON

A leading founder explicitly connected the Reformation, spreading knowledge, American settlement, and the growth of liberty.

SOURCES

26, 45, and 35.



FOUNDING VOICES / TRANSMISSION

Pulpit, Classroom, and Congress



Echo 2 - A Sermon Everyone Read

On January 30, 1750, Jonathan Mayhew climbs into the pulpit of Boston's West Church. On a day the Book of Common Prayer uses to remember Charles I as a saint and martyr, Mayhew rejects the conventional Anglican lesson of unlimited submission.

Opening Romans 13, he argues that civil authority is a trust for the common safety and welfare. Commands contrary to God's will are "null and void," and under severe oppression resistance may become a duty. Protestant Scripture-reading, Puritan memory, natural rights, English resistance thought, and the crisis of his own day meet in one sermon.

The printed sermon travels far beyond the room. In 1818, John Adams tells Hezekiah Niles that Mayhew's discourse "was read by every Body" and revived ancestral opposition to tyranny "in Church and State." The Revolution, Adams says, was the work of many minds and many years. Mayhew's sermon was one of its early sparks.

Here is the path in plain view: a named sermon, a founder's memory, and an idea traveling from pulpit to public argument.

STORY LESSON

Before muskets carried the Revolution, sermons taught hearers to ask whether power was fulfilling the moral purpose for which it existed.

SOURCES

25, 27, and 34.

Echo 3 - Witherspoon Crosses the Atlantic

John Witherspoon crosses the Atlantic in 1768 as a Scottish Presbyterian minister and scholar. At Princeton, his classroom fills with future ministers, lawyers, and public servants. He teaches Reformed theology beside moral philosophy, classical rhetoric, public law and politics, and the learning of the Scottish Enlightenment.

In May 1776, Witherspoon enters the pulpit as independence approaches. His sermon joins Providence, moral accountability, civil liberty, and religious liberty. Soon his public service carries those convictions into the Continental Congress, where he signs the Declaration of Independence.

FOUNDING VOICE

"God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable."

JOHN WITHERSPOON, 1776

Witherspoon immediately warned his hearers not to confuse true religion with railing at opponents or angry sectarian competition. Liberty, in his telling, required inward principle and outward conduct.

STORY LESSON

Reformation ideas reached the founding through living teachers who joined inherited faith to new learning and public responsibility.

SOURCES

28, 29, and 35.



FOUNDING VOICES

The Founders Speak



A Chorus of Founding Voices

John Adams

"From the time of the reformation, to the first settlement of America, knowledge gradually spread."

Source note 26.

Samuel Adams

"The right to freedom being the gift of God Almighty, it is not in the power of Man to alienate this gift."

Source note 44.

John Witherspoon

"There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire."

Source note 28.

James Madison

Religious duty is "precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society."

Source note 31.

Thomas Jefferson

"Almighty God hath created the mind free."

Source note 32.

George Washington

Worship according to conscience was "not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights."

Source note 43.

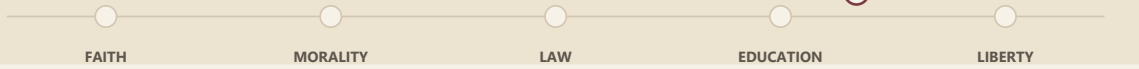
FOUNDER VOICE

Benjamin Franklin remembered Luther in 1749 as the reformer "who struck the great blow to papal tyranny in Europe." Source note 46.



STATION 9 / 09

FROM 1517 TO 1791



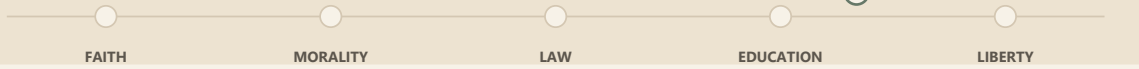
A Long Development of Ordered Liberty

1517	Luther circulates the Ninety-Five Theses against abuses surrounding indulgences.
1520	<i>The Freedom of a Christian</i> joins liberty to faith and loving service.
1521	At Worms, Luther refuses to recant unless answered by Scripture or evident reason.
1526	Tyndale's printed English New Testament begins crossing into England.
1536	Calvin publishes the first edition of the <i>Institutes</i> , later enlarged to include fuller teaching on civil government.
1556	John Ponet argues that rulers receive authority from the people for the commonwealth's good.
1579	<i>Vindiciae contra tyrannos</i> frames ruler and people through covenant and conditional obedience.
1581	The Dutch Act of Abjuration declares that an oppressing prince may become a tyrant.
1620	Mayflower passengers covenant into a civil body politic for just and equal laws.
1638-1639	Hooker preaches consent; Connecticut's Fundamental Orders establish elections and representation.
1644	Roger Williams publishes <i>The Bloudy Tenent</i> ; Samuel Rutherford publishes <i>Lex, Rex</i> .
1647	Massachusetts orders towns to provide schooling so Scripture will not be hidden by ignorance.
1663	Rhode Island's charter protects a lively experiment in religious liberty.
1682	William Penn joins rule of law and popular participation to protection for conscience.
1750	Jonathan Mayhew preaches that authority is a trust for the common good.
1765	John Adams links Reformation, spreading knowledge, American settlement, and liberty.
1773-1776	Backus appeals for religious liberty; Witherspoon preaches for civil and religious liberty; Virginia protects free exercise.
1786	Virginia adopts Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom.
1787-1791	The Constitution prohibits federal religious tests; the First Amendment protects free exercise and bars national establishment.



STATION 9 / 10

WHAT THE REFORMATION GAVE - WHAT AMERICA DEVELOPED



Reformation inheritance	American expression	How the idea grew
Scripture above human office	Appeals to higher law and Creator-given rights	Natural law, common law, and Enlightenment reasoning joined the argument
Conscience bound to God	Free exercise and resistance to compelled worship	Dissenters widened the principle into protection for their neighbors
Christian liberty	Liberty joined to duty and virtue	Spiritual freedom helped teach self-government and service
Covenant	Compacts, written constitutions, and mutual obligation	Congregational practice joined legal and philosophical ideas of contract
Fallen human nature	Suspicion of unchecked power	Political experience turned moral realism into accountable institutions
Lesser magistrates	Lawful resistance to tyranny	Later writers expanded a duty of office into a language of public trust
Vernacular Scripture	Literacy, schools, and public argument	Homes, churches, towns, and colleges formed generations of readers
Protestant dissent	Disestablishment and protected conscience	Appeals, petitions, charters, and laws carried conscience into public life

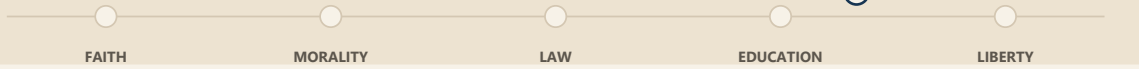
The relationship is best pictured as a seedbed, not a blueprint. A seed can shape what grows without determining every branch. American constitutional liberty developed in soil enriched by Reformation ideas and practices, while drawing nourishment from many other roots.

SOURCES 34, 35, 42, and 48.



STATION 9 / 11

CLOSING TAKEAWAY



A monk questioned an indulgence. A printer multiplied the question. A translator placed Scripture in ordinary hands. A conscience stood before an emperor. Reformed writers placed rulers beneath covenant and law. Refugees crossed borders and oceans. Colonists promised one another just and equal laws. Towns hired teachers. Dissenters demanded protection not only for their own faith, but eventually for the conscience of a neighbor.

Then Americans write those lessons into the law of a new nation: government receives just power through consent; rights do not come as favors from rulers; no religious test may guard federal office; and Congress may neither establish religion nor prohibit its free exercise.

The road that began in Wittenberg reaches Philadelphia strengthened by Magna Carta, English common law, classical history, natural law, Enlightenment thought, and colonial experience. Many streams meet, and the Reformation is one of the strongest. It has opened the Bible, trained readers, awakened conscience, placed rulers beneath law, inspired covenants, and taught communities to join liberty with duty.

Its great political gift is a durable conviction: no human power is truth's unquestionable master, and the conscience must remain answerable to God rather than commanded by the state.

Memory Line

The Reformation opened the Bible, awakened conscience, and taught that rulers too stand under law.

Gospel Memory Line

Christ frees the conscience from sin so the Christian may serve in love.

Garden Thread

Print carried the Word. Conscience questioned power. Covenant bounded rulers. Liberty gained a law.

Final Reflection

What kind of citizen can preserve liberty?

One who can read. One who can reason. One who will not sell conviction for safety. One who recognizes a law higher than appetite. One who guards the conscience of a neighbor. One who understands that freedom and responsibility grow from the same root.

The Christian response is to remember gratefully, examine truthfully, live courageously, and continue the work faithfully.

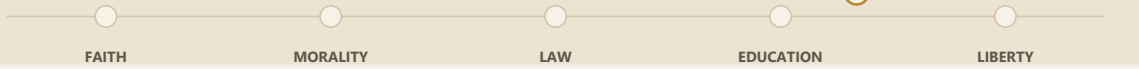
SOURCES

1, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, and 35.



STATION 9 / 12

SOURCE NOTES



Primary records, official collections, institutional scholarship, peer-reviewed research, and the supplied popular sources. Linked titles are clickable and invite further discovery.

1

[King James Bible](#), 2 Corinthians 3:17; John 8:32; Galatians 5:13; Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Romans 13:1; Proverbs 4:7; Romans 14:4. Scripture and Gospel framing.

2

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3

Martin Luther, [Ninety-Five Theses](#), German History in Documents and Images. Theses 32, 36, and 43; transmission to Archbishop Albrecht; door tradition treated cautiously.

4

Library of Congress, ["Luther the Priest"](#). Original purpose of the theses, print, and growth of the door image in public memory.

5

German History in Documents and Images, ["Luther and Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms"](#). Authenticated conscience statement and imperial edict.

6

Martin Luther, [The Freedom of a Christian](#), Hanover Historical Texts Project. Free-lord and dutiful-servant paradox.

7

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ["Martin Luther"](#). Theological liberty, two governments, civil order, and Luther's changing political positions.

8

Library of Congress, ["Let There Be Light: William Tyndale"](#). Printing at Worms, smuggling, execution, and legacy in the King James Bible.

9

Library of Congress, ["Religion and the Founding: America as a Religious Refuge"](#). Geneva Bible, Protestant migration, and the colonial religious setting.

10

John Calvin, [Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV, chapter 20](#), especially sections 8 and 31-32; also the [Meeter Center edition](#).

11

Constance Lee, ["Conscience and the Continuum of Constitutionalism: John Calvin on Civil Government"](#), *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 12 (2023), 34-54. Calvin's bounded offices, mutual duty, and historical context.

12

Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, [John Calvin biography and Servetus context](#). Calvin, Geneva, and the execution of Michael Servetus.

13

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John Ponet, [A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power](#), 1556; John Adams, [Defence of the Constitutions, vol. 6](#), praising Ponet.

15

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- 16 [Dutch Act of Abjuration](#), 1581, Declaration Project. A prince exists for the people and may become a tyrant through persistent oppression.
- 17 John Knox, [Letter to His Brethren in Scotland](#), 1557; Knox, [Appellation](#), EEBO-TCP; Samuel Rutherford, [Lex Rex](#), 1644.
- 18 [Mayflower Compact](#), Yale Avalon Project; Library of Congress, ["The Mayflower Compact"](#). Covenant, civil body politic, and just and equal laws.
- 19 [Fundamental Orders of Connecticut](#), Yale Avalon Project; Connecticut History, ["The Free Consent of the People"](#). Written procedures, elections, and Hooker's sermon notes.
- 20 Massachusetts General Court, ["Old Deluder Satan" school law](#), 1647. Town schools, literacy, Scripture, church, and commonwealth.
- 21 Roger Williams, [The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution](#), 1644. Civil peace, religious diversity, and protection for contrary consciences.
- 22 [Rhode Island Royal Charter](#), 1663, Rhode Island Secretary of State; U.S. National Park Service, ["Winter of 1636"](#) and ["Roger Williams: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical"](#). Wampanoag rescue, Massasoit's shelter, Narragansett negotiation, the founding of Providence, and full liberty in religious concerns.
- 23 William Penn, [Frame of Government of Pennsylvania](#), 1682; Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, ["The Great Law"](#); Library of Congress, ["William Penn Arrives in America"](#); National Park Service, [People of the City](#). Rule of law, popular participation, conscience, the City of Brotherly Love, and Philadelphia's growing religious variety.
- 24 Isaac Backus, [An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty](#), 1773; Library of Congress, ["An Appeal for Religious Liberty"](#).
- 25 Jonathan Mayhew, [A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission](#), 1750; Library of Congress, ["Religion and the American Revolution"](#).
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- 27 John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, [13 February 1818](#), Founders Online. Mayhew's sermon was read widely and revived opposition to tyranny in church and state.
- 28 John Witherspoon, [The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men](#), 1776. Justice, civil liberty, religious liberty, Providence, and public character.
- 29 Princeton University Art Museum, ["John Witherspoon"](#); Princeton University, [Witherspoon naming committee report](#); Princeton and Slavery Project, ["John Witherspoon"](#). Teaching, Madison, founding service, and historical context.
- 30 [Virginia Declaration of Rights](#), 1776, National Archives. Free exercise according to conscience and Christian forbearance.
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- 32 Thomas Jefferson, [Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom](#), 1779; [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#), 1786. A free mind, the limits of coercion, and equal civil capacity.
- 33 National Archives, [Constitution transcript](#) and [Bill of Rights transcript](#); Founders Online, [House debate on the First Amendment](#).
- 34 Library of Congress, [Religion and the Founding of the American Republic](#). Protestant institutions and diversity, refuge, establishments, Revolutionary religion, and the federal settlement.



- 35 Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, Oxford University Press; John Witte Jr., "[Reclaiming the Blessings of Religious Liberty](#)"; John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights*. Multi-generational influence and qualifications.
- 36 World History Institute, [October 2023 Journal](#), "[The Reformation: The American Connection](#)". Supplied source used to identify stories and leads; sweeping causal claims and quotations were independently checked.
- 37 Bill Federer, American Minute, "[Luther and the Protestant Reformation's Political Repercussions on America's Founding](#)". Supplied popular overview used as a research lead, not sole authority.
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- 41 World History Institute, [Journals Index](#). Reviewed for Reformation material, including issues on the American connection, defense against tyrants, Pilgrims, and Scotland.
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- 44 Samuel Adams, "[The Rights of the Colonists](#)", 1772. Life, liberty, property, consent, and freedom as God's gift.
- 45 John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, [28 June 1813](#), Founders Online. Adams's explanation of the shared principles invoked by a religiously varied Philadelphia assembly and by American majorities in the independence era.
- 46 Benjamin Franklin, [Poor Richard Improved, 1749](#), Founders Online. Luther remembered as striking a blow against papal tyranny.
- 47 George Washington's Mount Vernon, "[Spurious Quotations](#)". Documents why the supposed government, God, and Bible quotation is excluded.
- 48 Balthasar Hubmaier, *Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them*, 1524; University of Chicago, [Isaac Backus on church and state](#); Mark David Hall, "[The Reformed Tradition and the American Founding](#)". Radical Reformation, dissent, and scholarly bridge.

