

Discussion Notes on Christian Responsibility in Politics



The Discussion Notes support the Discussion Guide. The Discussion Notes may also be used for a longer, detailed lesson or sermon.

How Patrick Henry Inspires Christians to Register and Vote

Our Biblical **faith** promotes Biblical **values**, and those Biblical values play out in Biblical **responsibility**. What responsibility do Christians have in the civic arena? We have no better example than our Founding Fathers.

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry, Virginia's Governor, declared the immortal words: "Give me liberty, or give me death!" That moment was the *linchpin* that turned the tide and prepared the way for the thirteen colonies to fight for their God-given rights in the War for Independence. However, we have heard that declaration so often over the years that its lost its deeper meaning.

Who would choose death over liberty? What motivated our Founding Fathers to pledge their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" to the preservation of liberty? ¹

It is *essential* to revisit this story from America's founding to discover *why* Patrick Henry felt that he had a divine **responsibility** to stand up. He understood well that "the eyes of the LORD run to and fro to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him" (2 Chronicles 16:9).

To be sure, he did not place his life on the line, confronting King George III in a "values vacuum." Through the Great Awakening, God planted the seeds into America's fertile spiritual soil 42 years before he delivered his famous speech.

America's Great Awakening

As we explored in our first lesson, early settlers in the 1600s were primarily Christians whose three-fold passion was to enjoy freedom of religion, raise their children in the admonition of the Lord, and share the Gospel with the unsaved. But by 1733, Georgia, the 13th original colony, America had lost its fire for God.

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As they tamed the land and the colonists prospered, the less they relied on God for their daily bread. With wealth came complacency. As a result, church membership declined. ² Jonathan Edwards, a revivalist preacher, described his town, Northampton, Massachusetts, in a “degenerate time” with “dullness of religion.” ³

Rev. Samuel Blair of Pennsylvania, who became the chaplain of the Congress, stated, “Religion lay as it were dying, and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church.” ⁴ Sadly, the life of God was absent from many people and churches. God, in His mercy and in His plans for history, brought a revival—a “Great Awakening” that not only impacted America, but many other nations. ⁵

Jonathan Edwards: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

In God’s providence, a Protestant revival began in Edwards’ church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1733. It reached such an intensity in the winter of 1734 and the following spring that it threatened the business of the town. Amazingly, in six months, nearly 300 of the town’s 1,100 youths were admitted to the church. In 1737, Edwards documented the move of God in the essay, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*.

Then, in 1741, Edwards preached his most famous sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in Enfield, Connecticut. Considering the sermon’s title, you might be surprised to know that Edwards did not shout or speak loudly, but talked in a quiet, emotive voice. He moved his audience slowly from point to point, towards an inexorable conclusion: they were lost without the grace of God.⁶

He proposed ten “considerations”, starting with “God may cast wicked men into hell at any given moment” (Psalm 73:18). His fifth consideration was “At any moment God shall permit him, Satan stands ready to fall upon the wicked and seize them as his own.” As he concluded his hour-long sermon, Edwards made one final appeal: “Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come.” ⁷ After hearing those words, it is no wonder people were spiritually “awakened!”

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Edwards was interrupted many times during the sermon by people *moaning* and crying out, "What shall I do to be saved?"⁸ Historian George Marsden contends that "Edwards could take for granted ... that a New England audience knew well the Gospel remedy. The problem was getting them to *seek* it."⁹

George Whitefield: "Come Just As You Are to Christ"

In addition to Edwards, God used an *incredibly* gifted English preacher, George Whitefield, to awaken the colonists from their spiritual slumber. Because the Church of England had not assigned him a specific pulpit, he became one of the first "street preachers" of his time, sharing Christ with people in the parks and fields of England, reaching out to people who normally did not attend church. Like Jonathan Edwards, he developed a style of preaching that elicited emotional responses from his audiences.¹⁰

In 1740, Whitefield, known as the "lightning rod of revival," traveled to North America, where he preached a series of revivals that became part of the "Great Awakening." God used his charisma and unique ability to project his voice, preaching nearly every day for months to large crowds as he traveled throughout the colonies. His journey on horseback from New York City to Charleston, South Carolina was at that time the longest in North America by a white man.¹¹

While explicitly affirming God's sole agency in salvation, Whitefield freely offered the Gospel, saying at the end of his sermons: "Come poor, lost, undone sinner, come *just as you* are to Christ."¹² No doubt, you're reminded of the famous hymn "Just As I Am" which Billy Graham used in his altar calls after coming to Christ himself in 1934 during that very same song at a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The words are as powerful today as they were years ago.

Just as I am - without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come!¹³

Remarkably, Whitefield preached at least 18,000 times to perhaps 10 *million* listeners in Great Britain and the American colonies. In an age when crossing

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the Atlantic Ocean was a long and hazardous adventure, he visited America seven times, making 13 ocean crossings in total.¹⁴ It's estimated that 80% of all Americans heard Whitefield speak.¹⁵

The Dramatic Results of The Great Awakening

A great outpouring of God's Spirit occurred through Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Samuel Davies, and others that united and set the colonies spiritually aflame. Thousands were converted and churches were filled. Godliness *swept* through the colonies.¹⁶

Benjamin Franklin, who became friends with Whitefield and often heard him preach, records in his autobiography in 1739 the great impact the revival had. He wrote, "It was *wonderful* to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing Psalms sung in different families of every street."¹⁷ We can only hope that Franklin, a staunch deist, embraced the faith of Whitefield as he listened to his friend preach night after night.

But, to be clear, the transformation of the people of the colonies was not *exclusively* about their assurance of salvation and their freshly-minted dependence on God in their personal lives. It impacted *every* area of life. Americans understood that King George had usurped God-given authority to rule them. Many ministers of the Anabaptists, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Dissenters, and Separatists began teaching that there was "no King, but King Jesus."¹⁸ In fact, the titles of their sermons reveal that Biblical truth, providing a blueprint for building a nation.

Look at these sermon titles which account for their *civic* responsibility:

- [Civil Magistrates Must Be Just: Ruling in the Fear of God](#), Charles Chauncy (1747)
- [Religion and Patriotism: The Constituents of a Good Soldier](#), Samuel Davies (1755)
- [Thanksgiving Sermon on the Repeal of the Stamp Act](#), Charles Chauncy (1766)

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- [Civil Government is for the Good of the People—the Character of Good Rulers, and the Duties of Citizens](#), Samuel Cooke (1770)
- [Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers](#), Samuel Sherwood (1774)
- Thanksgiving Sermon: The Christian Duty of Resistance to Tyrants – Prepare for War – Appeal to Heaven, William Gordon (1774)
- [The Right of Self-Government is from God—the Divine Right of Kings Exploded](#), Samuel Langdon (1775)¹⁹

The connection between the First Great Awakening (1735-70) and the American Revolution (1776-90) seems clear. If God had *not* revived the colonists' hearts, which impacted their view of the role of civil government, they would *never* have initiated the War for Independence from the British crown.²⁰

The Founding Fathers were young men during the Great Awakening. Without a doubt, this revival shaped their faith, character, and worldview, preparing them to birth to an exceptional nation. They well understood that America was set to become the *first* constitutional republic in history founded on Christian principles. It also gave the American people the moorings to live in liberty—including self-government, morality, a Biblical worldview, regard for life, and a fear of God.²¹

How King George Punished Pastor James Ireland

Soon, the long arm of English law forced American clergymen to obtain a license to preach. Even with a license, they could only preach Anglican Church doctrine, which conveniently *excluded* all talk of liberty. Any clergyman who dared to preach liberty, independence, or self-government was *severely* punished.²²

In November 1769, Pastor James Ireland, just 21, was warned by British magistrates in Culpepper County, Virginia that he *must* obtain a license to preach or be arrested. Between 1768 and 1770, thirty Virginia Baptist preachers were arrested. Pastor Ireland wrote in his diary, “I sat down and counted the cost. Freedom or prison? Having ventured all upon Christ, I determined to suffer all for Him.”²³ In Mark 8:34-36, Jesus said:

“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For

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what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

Pastor Ireland continued preaching and was arrested. On the way to jail, he was attacked by a Tory mob supportive of King George, but his captors safely transported him to jail. During his six-month imprisonment, he continued preaching, declaring the Gospel through the iron bars of his cell window where great crowds stood to hear him.²⁴ The God-haters of his day responded with absolute viciousness. Baptist historian Garnett Ryland wrote, “They filled the jail with fumes of burning sulphur and pepper, they exploded gun powder under it and formed a plot to poison him. He suffered from a scorching fever and his health was permanently injured. He was only 21, yet the high-spirited youth bore it all with courage, dignity and serenity.”²⁵

The Apostle, Paul, asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

Patrick Henry Witnesses Pastor Ireland’s Brutal Beating

Patrick Henry, a 35-year-old lawyer, was riding into Culpepper, Virginia, where he personally witnessed the brutal beating of Pastor Ireland. He wrote, “There, in the middle of the town square, was a minister tied to a whipping post, his back laid bare and bloody with the bones of his ribs showing. I turned to someone and asked what the man had done to deserve such a beating as this. The reply was that the man being scourged was a minister who refused to take a license. The minister, in pain and bleeding, was jailed again.”²⁶

Days later, Ireland had the opportunity to apply for a license to preach. This was a mockery, however, since the English government would issue only one license per county and Culpepper County had already one licensed Anglican clergyman.

Meanwhile, Patrick was profoundly affected by Ireland’s beating.²⁷ Patrick was shocked, revolted, dismayed, and angry at American suffering under the ever-growing power of the English government. As a deeply committed Christian, he knew God’s call on this nation. Patrick Henry began to comprehend, like so many other patriots, the extent of the ruthless tyranny England was placing upon the colonists. He could not shake from his mind the memory of that bleeding minister, suffering for the right to preach the Gospel.²⁸

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Patrick Henry Takes a Stand

By March 1775, Patrick Henry became increasingly annoyed with the delegates to the Second Virginia Convention. It seemed some men would rather concede freedom, afraid to displease the British crown. Such weak, compromising English loyalty repulsed Henry.²⁹ He spoke boldly, saying:

“I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve. This is *no* time for ceremony. The question before the House is one of awful moment to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or *slavery*.”

As he spoke, Henry held his wrists together as though they were manacled and raised them toward the heavens.³⁰

“Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty towards the majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.”

At the end of his *moving* 7-minute speech, Henry concluded:

“Gentlemen may cry, ‘Peace, peace’-- but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle . . . is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?³¹

“*Forbid* it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty [Henry *broke* his imaginary chains and grasped an ivory letter opener] or give me *death*!”

As he uttered these final words, he plunged the letter opener toward his chest, mimicking a knife blow to the heart.³²

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Virginia Delegates Vote for the War for Independence

For several moments after Henry sat down, the assembled delegates seemed at a loss for words. “No other member . . . was yet adventurous enough to interfere with that voice which had so recently subdued and captivated,” delegate Edmund Randolph later said. A hushed silence descended on the room. “Every eye yet gazed entranced on Henry,” said the Baptist minister. “Men were beside themselves.”³³

While some of the Convention’s delegates maintained their loyalist stance—one called Henry’s words “infamously insolent”—Patrick’s speech tipped the scales in favor of defensive action. After Richard Henry Lee and Thomas Jefferson both gave their support, the resolution passed by only a few votes. Henry was appointed the head of a new committee charged with readying the Virginia militia for combat.³⁴

In his book *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, Richard Wheeler writes, “Patrick Henry’s dramatic and courageous words have lived in the hearts of bold patriots over these many years. What is little considered is that Patrick Henry was motivated by the vivid picture of a minister dying for liberty. Pastor James Ireland’s beating, moved the heart and mind of Patrick Henry. In turn, Patrick’s anointed speech persuaded the House of Burgesses to join with other colonies and break ties with England.

“Had the wealthy aristocrats from Virginia, the most powerful colony, not been so inspired by Patrick Henry, Virginia would more than likely have remained tied to England. The other colonies would have followed suit and America’s history would have been written differently. It is very possible that the American War for Independence would not have been fought and won.”³⁵

How Can *You* Take a Stand?

What is *your* **responsibility**? We might not be concerned with a foreign power taking away our freedom of religion or freedom of speech, but within our borders are those who would denigrate, limit, or destroy our liberty.

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Academia, the media, Hollywood, and the culture at large assails the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, and the right to publicly proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ. In His sermon on the mount, our Savior declared that “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Matthew 5:13).

Like salt was used to preserve meat in the age before refrigeration, Christians are a preserving element of our social fabric. Dr. Robert Jeffress, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, said:

“We all know Jesus commanded us to be salt and light. Salt has no preservative impact as long as it stays in the saltshaker. To do its job, it has to get *out* of the shaker and it has to penetrate the meat. We've got to penetrate our culture and that *includes* government . . . We have allowed Christians, who really have no courage at all, to manufacture this isolationist theology that says, ‘Now we're free to talk to God's own people and other people. Or, we're free to even talk to unbelievers about salvation. But we have no right to speak to the world at large, to leaders at large, about issues, moral absolutes.’ I don't know where anybody came up with such an *ignorant* idea. Because, when you look at the Old Testament—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah, Joseph—they didn't just speak to God's own people, they spoke to ungodly leaders and an ungodly culture and said without, stuttering or stammering, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ John the Baptist confronted rulers. I think we need to have that courage, too.”

David Barton put it this way. “Christians, through bad doctrine, political inactivity, and apathy have handed the reins of the nation over to leaders who awarded life-long appointments to justices not willing, but also eager to uproot Christian practices that have long been the heart of this nation for centuries.”³⁶

At end of his life, Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). If we want to stand before the throne of God one day and echo those words, we need to *take a stand* for His values at the ballot box and elect Godly men and women who will pass God-honoring laws and select God-honoring judges.

Samuel Adams, the fourth Massachusetts Governor and the second cousin to President John Adams, said, “***Let each citizen remember at the moment he is***

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offering his vote that he is not making a present or a compliment to please an individual . . . but that ***he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society for which he is accountable to God and his country.***³⁷

Noah Webster, best known for his 1838 dictionary, delivered a similar admonition: “Let it be impressed on your mind that God *commands* you to choose for rulers just men who will rule in the fear of God . . . If the citizens neglect their duty and place unprincipled men in office, the government will soon be corrupted . . . If [our] government fails to secure public prosperity and happiness, it must be because the citizens neglect the Divine commands, and elect bad men to make and administer the laws.”³⁸

Believers in a nation such as ours, have a *responsibility* to Heaven for every decision made on Earth. This includes registering to vote and casting an *informed* vote for the people who will best implement Biblical values.

What is Your Christian Responsibility in the Civic Arena?

1. **Pray for our elected officials.** I Timothy 2:1-3 says, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior.”
2. **Registered to vote.** Monday, October 5, is the last day to register to vote in the November election for President and other elected offices. The President, in turn, makes lifetime appointments to our Federal courts, leads our nation, and represents the United States to the world.

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You are eligible to vote if:

- You are a United States citizen.
 - You are a resident of the county where you submit the application.
 - You are at least 17 years and 10 months old when your register, and you are 18 years of age on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020.
 - You are not a convicted felon.
3. **Vote on Tuesday, November 3, 2020** for candidates who will legislate God-honoring policies and appoint God-honoring judges.

Discussion Questions:

1. In light of our Biblical faith which develops Biblical values, why do we have a Biblical responsibility to register to vote and cast an informed vote?
2. What was the name of the famous sermon Jonathan Edwards of preached in 1741, which is credited with sparking the Great Awakening?
3. American pastors began preaching “no King, but King Jesus.” What does that phrase mean?
4. What was the connection between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution?
5. How did King George III respond to the preaching of American pastors who challenged their congregations that it was their Christian duty to resist tyrants?
6. What was Pastor James Ireland’s response to the requirement to get a license to preach or go to jail?
7. How was Patrick Henry impacted by the beating of Pastor Ireland?
8. In his famous March 23, 1775 speech, what verbal imagery did Patrick Henry use to communicate the colonists’ forced servitude to the English crown?
9. In light of how close the vote was within the influential Virginia delegation to declare war on England, do you have a renewed appreciation for the maxim: “One person can make a difference”?
10. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we are the “salt of the earth” in Matthew 5:13. What did He mean by that?

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- ¹ Richard Wheeler, *God's Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, Mantle Ministries, Bulverde, Texas, p. 128.
 - ² "What was the Great Awakening? Know the Facts & Summary", Christianity.com, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/the-great-awakening-11630212.html>
 - ³ Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*, Edinburgh: Printed by Thomas Lumisden and John Robertson, 1738.
 - ⁴ Joseph Tracy. *The Great Awakening: A history of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*, Boston: Charles Tappan, 1845, p. 26.
 - ⁵ WallBuilders, *Lesson 2: Colonial Period (mid-1600s to 1765)*, September 21, 2019, accessed March 13, 2020, p. 4., <https://wallbuilders.com/chw/lessons/lesson-2-colonial-period/>
 - ⁶ Jonathan Edwards (theologian), *Wikipedia*, accessed March 13, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Edwards_\(theologian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Edwards_(theologian))
 - ⁷ Blue Letter Bible, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by Jonathan Edwards, accessed March 14, 2020, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm
 - ⁸ Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, *Wikipedia*, accessed March 14, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God
 - ⁹ George M. Marsden, (2003), *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 224.
 - ¹⁰ George Whitefield, *Wikipedia*, accessed March 14, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Whitefield
 - ¹¹ "The Digital Puritan", *George Whitefield*, accessed March 13, 2020, <http://digitalpuritan.net/george-whitefield/>
 - ¹² Ernest G. Bormann, (1985), *Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press,
 - ¹³ Charlotte Elliott, *Wikipedia*, accessed March 13, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Elliott
 - ¹⁴ George Whitefield, *Wikipedia*, accessed March 13, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Whitefield
 - ¹⁵ David Barton, "Worth Riding a Hundred Miles to Hear", in *The Founders' Bible*, Shiloh Publishers, 2012, p. 829.
 - ¹⁶ WallBuilders, *Lesson 2: Colonial Period (mid-1600s to 1765)*, p. 4.
 - ¹⁷ *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by John Bigelow, New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1932, p. 217.
 - ¹⁸ Richard Wheeler, *God's Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 129.
 - ¹⁹ WallBuilders, *Lesson 2: Colonial Period (mid-1600s to 1765)*, p. 4.
 - ²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5.
 - ²¹ *Ibid*.
 - ²² Richard Wheeler, *God's Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 130.
 - ²³ *Ibid*.
 - ²⁴ *Ibid*.
 - ²⁵ Ryland Garnett, *The Baptists of Virginia* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), pp. 64-65.
 - ²⁶ Richard Wheeler, *God's Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 130.
 - ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 131.
 - ²⁸ *Ibid*.
 - ²⁹ *Ibid*.

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³⁰ Evan Andrews, “Patrick Henry’s ‘Liberty or Death’ Speech”, History Channel, August 22, 2018, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/patrick-henrys-liberty-or-death-speech-240-years-ago>

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the hands of an Angry God”, accessed March 14, 2020, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm

³² Evan Andrews, “Patrick Henry’s ‘Liberty or Death’ Speech”.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Richard Wheeler, *God’s Mighty Hand: Providential Occurrences in World History*, p. 133.

³⁶ WallBuilders, “Ten Steps to Change America”, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://wallbuilders.com/ten-steps-change-america/>

³⁷ *The Boston Gazette*, April 16, 1781.

³⁸ Noah Webster, *The History of the United States* (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1832), pp. 336-337.