

THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

FOURTH EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

A person's memory gives him his sense of identity. A person who does not remember anything about his past does not know who he is—we call this amnesia. But amnesia is not a problem just for individuals. Some societies suffer from amnesia. They know very little about their past—how they became a civilization, what values bind their citizens together, and why some men and women gave their lives to preserve their culture.



Just as a person cannot live normally if he does not know who he is, so a country cannot function normally without a clear sense of its past. For a nation to prosper, its citizens must accept the sacrifices that are necessary to hold the nation together. Some of the most notable sacrifices are taxes, laws, and the defense of the nation. These sacrifices can be a burden to those who do not appreciate their country or know what it means to be a citizen.

We have designed this book to be much more than a record of names, wars, and dates. Throughout this course, we desire to teach what it means to be an American. We will present U.S. history as the unfolding of several core values. Core values are the ideas, or the ideals, that forge a common culture and bind a nation together. Americans exist as they do because they tend to value the same ideas. To be a productive, valuable citizen, an American must know what these ideas are. To serve this country as a Christian, an American must know how to judge these ideas with the Word of God in mind.

I. What Is an American?

What is an American? The simple answer to this question is a citizen of the United States. But that answer does not provide much help. It does not tell us what kind of person an American is. To find a more helpful answer, we will need to consider what Americans have tended to love, or—as we will say repeatedly in the following paragraphs—what Americans have tended to *value*.

Freedom

Freedom, also called liberty, is a condition in which a person can make his own choices without fear of harm—as long as his choices do not harm anybody else. Americans value the freedom to worship as they wish, to choose their own jobs, to own whatever property they can afford, and to play a role in their government. When these freedoms are threatened, Americans quickly react.

Several early Americans, however, defined freedom differently. John Winthrop distinguished between false liberty and true liberty. He said that the former is the liberty to do whatever one wishes. True liberty, he said, is freedom to do “that only which is good, just, and honest.” Isaac Backus, a pastor at the time of the War for Independence, made a similar distinction. He said that when a person’s “highest pleasure” is “to love God with all his heart, and his neighbour as himself,” that person is free to do whatever pleases him.

Without restrictions, doing whatever one wishes is not freedom but slavery to one's sinful desires.

Is it good to be free? That depends on your definition of freedom. The Bible values liberty (1 Cor. 7:21, 23; Rom. 6:17–22). But it also emphasizes that humans must obey God and His Word. A nation that refuses to submit to God will experience His judgment (Pss. 2:10–12; 9:17). It is good to be free if we choose to please God and help others. It is not good to be free if we use our choices to disobey God and harm others.

Problems arise when people argue that it is more important to be free than to be good. If a nation values freedom over goodness, then freedom is no longer a good core value. A society that values freedom over goodness encourages people to do whatever they wish. If people choose to do wrong, they hurt their society. Soon the society questions what is right and values its freedom to do wrong. We see this happen today when people choose to kill unborn children.

For some Americans today, freedom has come to mean independence from God and religion. We call these people secularists. **Secularism** is the belief that religion has no place in government. Secularists assume that if a government is religious, it will be unreasonable. As you read about American history, watch for the nation's slow move away from treating religion as a central part of society. The America we now live in is far different from the America that once was.



Individualism

Individualism is the belief that a human should think of himself as an individual and not just as a member of a group. An individualist wants to be independent, take care of himself, and take responsibility for his own actions.

God values humans as individuals. He condemns and rewards them individually (Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 2:6–11), and He demands that governments do the same (Deut. 24:16). He commends individuals who stand against the wrongdoing of their community (Num. 13:30; 14:22–24; Gal. 2:11–14). In addition, the Bible teaches that it is the individual's duty to use wisdom and hard work to avoid poverty (Prov. 27:23–24; 2 Thess. 3:10).

But the Bible also says that it is important to depend on others (1 Cor. 12:21–27; Gal. 6:2). God expects Christians to participate in the community of the church, and in eternity He will gather all saved humanity together in a city, the new Jerusalem. Humans must work together—and be generous—if they are to please God. We cannot use individualism as an excuse to act selfishly. Most importantly, humans must depend on God through Jesus Christ for salvation. Those who say they do not need God will find that their own strength, initiative, and wisdom are not enough to carry them through this life and beyond.

Throughout much of our nation's history, Americans have taken pride in their individualism. The story of America is the story of people who sought financial, social, and religious independence. It is the story of explorers, pioneers, inventors, and entrepreneurs. But it



is also the story of communities, churches, businesses, and volunteer organizations.

Equality

Each time we recite the words “One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” in the Pledge of Allegiance, we affirm our pledge to **equality**. Equality is a social condition in which all people are treated the same in various conditions and situations of life. Some applications of equality are not controversial. For example, most Americans value equal standing before the law. Other applica-



tions of equality are controversial because they stand in tension with other values. For example, equal distribution of wealth stands at odds with freedom, individualism, and growth.

The Bible teaches that all people are equally valued because they are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26–27). Therefore, not even a king may take a person’s life or property unjustly (2 Sam. 11–12; 1 Kings 21). But the Bible also teaches that a person may lose his right to life, property, or pleasure. If a person disobeys God’s moral rules, he deserves punishment. He should not be treated the same as other citizens. Treating him the same is not justice but injustice.

Americans have always valued equality. A famous line in the Declaration of Independence affirms equality: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” But

Americans have often failed to live up to this value. Repeatedly, they have failed to treat minorities—especially American Indians and black Americans—as fellow image bearers of God. Some of the most difficult struggles of the past two centuries were results of inequality.

Growth

Americans love **growth**. By *growth* we mean achieving goals—gaining wealth, buying property, changing the environment, and enjoying new experiences.

The desire for growth appears in every period of American history. During the colonial period, Europeans left the security of home to find new opportunities to gain wealth and property and spread Christianity. Later, Americans declared their independence from England in order to preserve their liberty and grow according to their own wishes. Soon after, Americans began looking across the continent to find more land and the opportunities it provided. American inventions and ingenuity made the United States a leading manufacturer and trading partner in the world. In the twentieth century, Americans experienced the growth of their free market economy, advances in technology, and increased opportunities overseas.

God gives us the desire for growth. In the **Creation Mandate** of Genesis 1:28, He calls us to exercise authority over His earth. This is a huge task. It cannot be accomplished without growth in knowledge, technology, and culture.



Because humans are fallen, it is easy for the desire for growth to develop into greed and selfishness. Although it is good for us to seek growth in many areas, we must be careful not to let growth become an idol. Some Americans have pursued growth in unjust ways. They have taken land unjustly from others or grown wealthy by mistreating those who work for them. Even when growth is not pursued unjustly, people are tempted to be preoccupied with temporal things rather than with the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

II. Establishing Justice: The Primary Biblical Purpose for Government

Establishing **justice** is the primary purpose of government according to the Bible (1 Kings 10:9; Ps. 72:1-7, 11-14; Prov. 29:14). This is one of the primary purposes of American government. Establishing justice is the second purpose given for the U.S. government in the Preamble of the Constitution. (The first purpose given for the government in the Preamble is to create a union of states under one government.)

The importance of justice raises the question of what justice is. Different people have different answers to this question. We are tempted to define justice in terms of our core values without considering God and His Word. Some people might say that justice is equality. But what kind of equality do they mean? Should all Americans live in the same kind of house? Should they all earn the same amount of money? These ideas of equality stand in tension with the core values of freedom, individualism, and growth. To achieve that kind of equality, the core values of freedom, individualism, and growth must be curtailed. Some people might say that this curtailment is the cost of justice.

Others might argue that the trampling of other core values is unjust. They might say that freedom, not equality, is the measure of justice. They might say that justice is achieved when people have the freedom to do whatever they wish, as long as they do not limit other people's freedoms or cause them harm. This approach to justice values individualism and freedom over certain kinds of equality. But it too has deficiencies. What causes others harm? Is harm limited only to physical harm? What about harming someone's reputation? What about teaching false ideas that will harm a person's soul?

True justice is based on the fact that all humans bear the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28; 9:6; James 3:9). The image of God in humans is the basis for the rights that people have. Establishing justice means ensuring that the rights of all humans are respected. This often involves punishing those who violate the rights of others. So thinking about justice means thinking about the kinds of rights that God's image bearers have.

Sometimes justice runs up against American core values. Some Americans claim that forbidding homosexuals to marry violates homosexuals' freedom and equality. Others argue that paying workers a just wage limits freedom and growth. American Christians might be swayed by such arguments. They truly value freedom, individualism, equality, and growth. But they must value such things only as they are consistent with the Bible's vision of justice.



Rights?

Our human tendency is to claim more rights than we ought to and avoid the responsibility of honoring others' rights. We need guidance about the extent of our rights. The Bible provides this guidance. The rights that God's image bearers have include the following:

- right to life (Gen. 9:6)
- right to freedom from enslavement (Exod. 21:16)
- right to compensation for work performed (Lev. 19:13-14)
- right to compensation for a work injury caused by an employer (Exod. 21:26-34)
- right to maintain one's own property (Exod. 22:1, 4, 7-13)
- right to justice (Lev. 19:15-16)

Because holiness lies at the heart of being made in the image of God, a holy society will be a just society (Eph. 4:24). It will not allow the propagation of pornography or lewdness in its bookstores or theaters. Obscene talk will not be heard on its airwaves. It will seek to limit divorce. It will seek to teach its citizens virtue.

III. The Christian and Civic Responsibility

Early Americans believed that the best way to preserve American values was to create a **republic**. A republic is a nation ruled by law through representatives chosen by the people. In a republic, the people choose representatives who work together to craft laws. In America, those laws must agree with the U.S. Constitution. The republican form of government places limits on those who govern as well as on those who are governed. All are under the law.

In a republic, citizens play an important role in their government. This role is especially important for Christians. In the Bible, Christians are told to submit to government, good or bad, except in areas in which obedience to God is at stake. Even then Christians are told to be willing to suffer for doing right rather than rebel. Because of their responsibility toward governmental authority, Christians should guide their government toward pleasing God when they have the opportunity. More significantly, Christians are to do good to all people (Gal. 6:10). One avenue for doing good is participating in government. This participation can range from voting for wise leaders to running for office. Understanding the history of this nation—its values, its mistakes, and its successes—is an important part of preparing to participate in the political process.



INTRODUCTION REVIEW

Making Connections

1. What is the function of core values in a society?
2. What are the two kinds of freedom that need to be distinguished by Christians?
3. What positive role does individualism play in a society?
4. What is true justice based on?
5. What limitation does a republic place on those who govern?

Developing History Skills

1. The Preamble to the Constitution says that establishing justice was one of the purposes for writing the Constitution. Read the Preamble (on p. 125), and identify other purposes for the Constitution that relate to justice.
2. Read the fourth paragraph of the Declaration of Independence on page 97 ("We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."). Identify the core values that the paragraph presents.

Thinking Critically

1. Because people disagree about values and right and wrong, modern philosophers have attempted to find ways of achieving justice without making judgments about right and wrong. One popular approach is utilitarian. It says that justice is achieved when the greatest happiness is achieved for the most people. Another popular approach is libertarian. It says that maximizing freedom of choice for everyone maximizes justice for everyone. Evaluate these approaches from a Christian perspective.
2. Sometimes core values stand in tension with one another. Significant economic growth may result in some inequalities, and efforts to ensure certain kinds of equality might limit freedom and individualism. What happens when a nation cannot decide how to define its core values or cannot even decide what those core values should be?

Living as a Christian Citizen

1. Pick a current political issue that you are concerned about. List ways in which a Christian citizen can play a role in dealing with these issues.
2. Respond to the argument that the government should not prohibit pornography or fornication because doing so limits freedom.

People, Places, and Things to Remember

freedom
secularism
individualism
equality
growth
Creation Mandate
justice
republic