

CLASS 4

Faith During the American Revolution

- Christian Responses to the Revolution
- Faith of the Founders
- The First Amendment



Loyalism

- Argued that, for various practical, political, and scriptural reasons, it was better to remain a part of the British empire

“Obedience to government is... particularly incumbent on Christians, because (in addition to its moral fitness) it is enjoined by the positive commands of God; and, therefore, when Christians are disobedient to human ordinances, they are also disobedient to God. [...] To pursue liberty, then, in a manner not warranted by law, whatever the pretense may be, is clearly to be hostile to liberty [in Christ]; and those persons who thus *promise you liberty* are themselves *the servants of corruption.*” – Jonathan Boucher, *On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance* (1775)



Pacifism

- Argued that the Bible not only forbade resisting the authority of government, but also the use of force on either side
- Fined, mistreated, and distrusted by both sides, though not universally

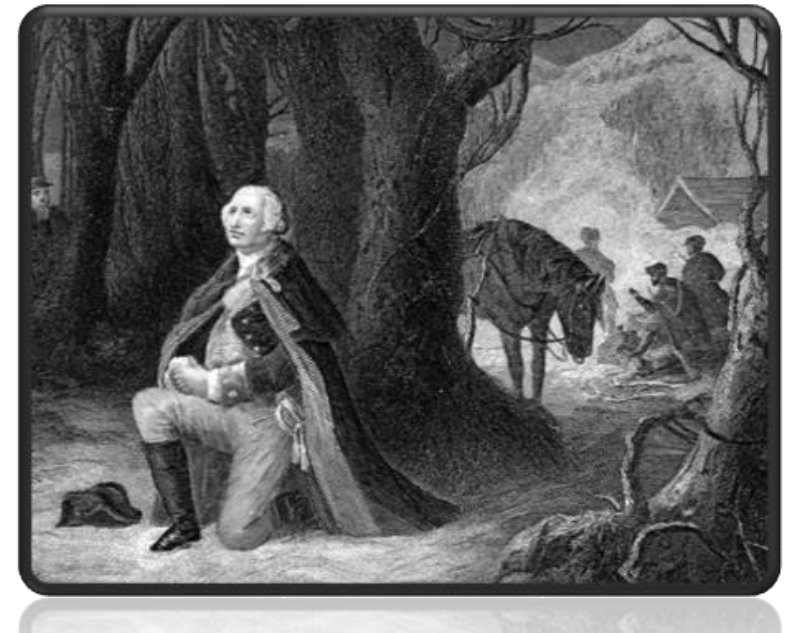
“[Christ] positively enjoins us to love our enemies, to bless those that curse us, to do good to those that hate us, and to pray for them which despitefully use and persecute us. [...] On the other hand, War requires of its votaries that they kill, destroy, lay waste, and to the utmost of their power distress and annoy, and in every way and manner deprive those they esteem their enemies of support and comfort.”
– Anthony Benezet, *Serious Considerations on Several Important Subjects* (1778)



Patriotism

- Argued that freedom, and the pursuit of it (even by violence), are God-given rights of mankind, which Britain was violating
- Believed that only by creating a better nation could individuals serve God as He intended them to

“There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us [2 Chron 32:8]. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone [Eccl 9:11]; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election [choice]. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest.” – Patrick Henry, 1775

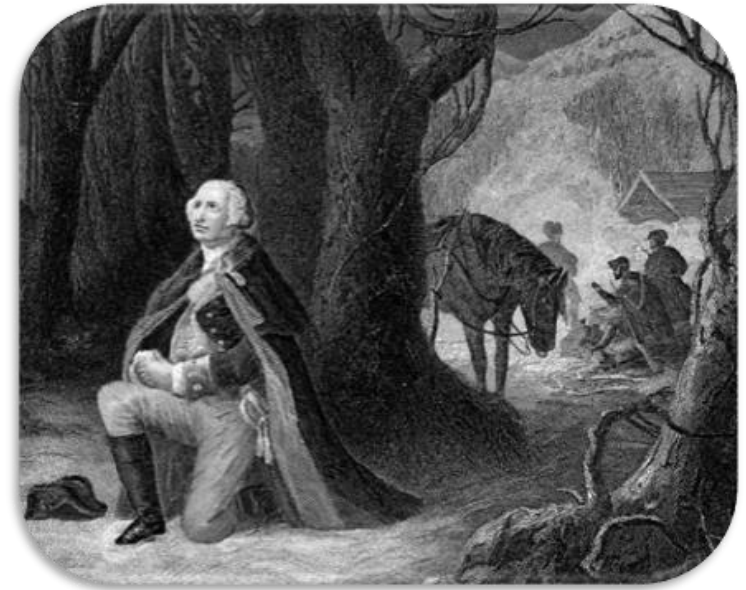


Discussion Question

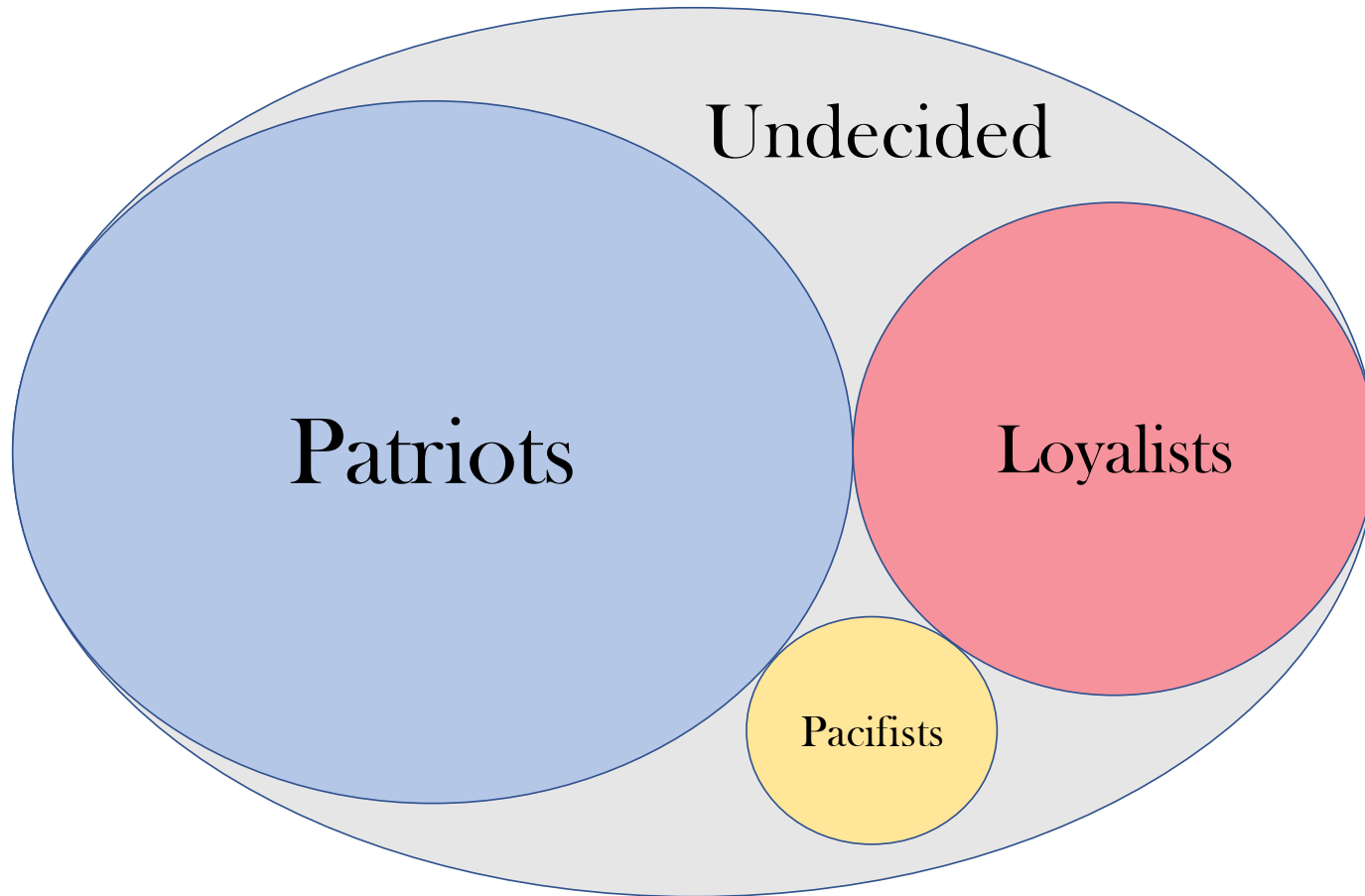
How would you describe Patrick Henry's use of scripture in his "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech? What biblical (meaning "found in the Bible," even if not "consistent with NT Christianity") principles does he assert underlie his arguments?

Patriotism

- Scriptural defenses of revolution often centered on reinterpreting prophetic texts (e.g.- the stone, Daniel 2) and a millennial interpretation of history
 - Built on the Puritan (Calvinistic) view that corrupt humans needed godly governments to check their sinful tendencies
 - Saw all of human history as a battle between Christ and anti-Christ, and believed that the Revolution might usher in a golden age of Christendom
 - Included claims that the Colonies would be a “chosen nation”
- Built on confluence of Puritan and Enlightenment thinking about God and human progress
 - Probably guilty of prooftexting or stretching the meaning of Scripture in their argumentation

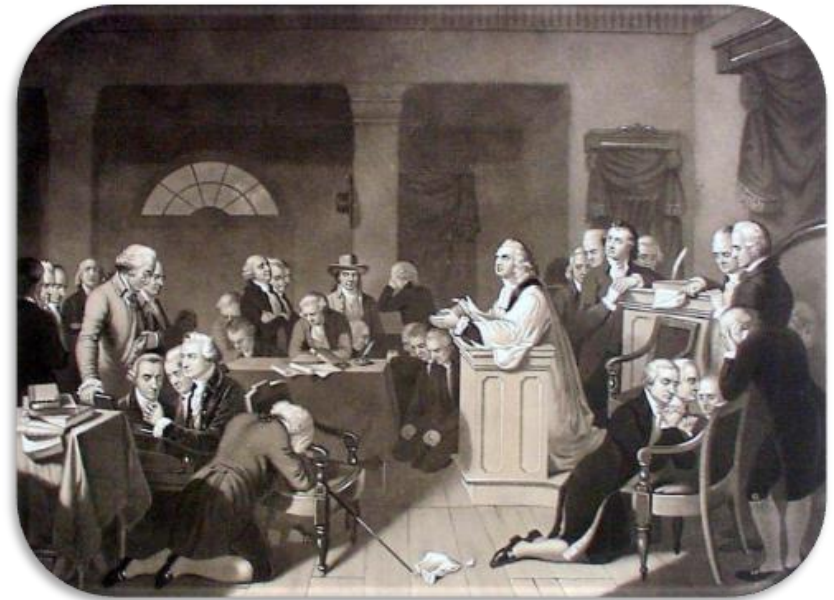


Views on Independence (1775)



Faith of the Founders

- The “Founding Fathers” generally viewed the relationship with Britain as a political problem to be solved by political means
- They saw Christian liberty as the foundation, rather than the chief goal, of the revolution
- Many untraditional kinds of Christianity among the founders, but also some sincere and moral believers
- At the same time, nearly all of the founders believed that personal morality was the foundation of a nation, and many held themselves to extraordinarily high standards of moral behavior



The First Amendment

- Reasons for freedom of religion:
 - In history, the comingled church and state had propped each other up to subjugate the population and exert control over thought and social improvement
 - Given the unprecedented diversity of American religious groups, a “state church” was a practical impossibility
- Integrated church and state:
 - A state(-sponsored) church that claimed divine authority for the state government
 - Tax-supported churches (not official) that would not criticize the state government for fear of losing their support
 - Forces all tax payers to support certain churches, whether they agree with them or not



Discussion Question

Read Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist Association.

What do you think Jefferson means when he says, "Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties"?

The First Amendment

- Two views:
 - “A wall of separation between Church and State” -Thomas Jefferson
 - “[The 1st Amendment allows] Christianity... to receive encouragement from the state, so far as was not incompatible with the private rights of conscience, and the freedom of religious worship.” -Joseph Story, Supreme Court Justice (1812-1845)
- Important notes:
 - Founders did not intend to prohibit religiously-based arguments in support of a law
 - Were not trying to strip churches of all benefits a government could render (legal/physical protection, tax advantages, etc.)
 - Assumed that individual morality would continue to undergird the nation’s actions and decisions, supported by the new freedom of religion

