

PROTESTANT FOUNDATIONS:
Covenant, Reformation, and Building Great Nations

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I. Introduction

What guided the Pilgrims to the New World? What steeled the spines of the first settlers and explorers? What faith led men and women to weave together a complex, decentralized network of loyalties, checks, and balances — the very architecture of American liberty?

Those are not rhetorical questions. They have answers. And those answers matter more right now than almost anything else in our public debate, because a growing chorus of prominent Americans — from Candace Owens to JD Vance — are insisting that the answers point to Rome. In this telling, the present cultural chaos is Martin Luther's fault. The Reformation shattered Western Christendom, untethered conscience from authority, and planted the seeds of the identity politics and civilizational collapse we're living through today. The prescription follows directly: America must become Roman Catholic to be renewed.

That diagnosis is wrong. And the prescription is dangerous.

America is a thoroughly Protestant nation — built on the radical liberty of justification by faith alone and the supreme authority of Scripture.¹ It was settled by explorers and pilgrims who had the adventure of providence in their hearts and covenantal history in their bones. It was the faith that Luther rediscovered, that Calvin articulated, that Whitefield proclaimed, and that Washington believed. That distinctly Protestant faith built America. And understanding it is the only way to rebuild what we are losing.

Whatever comes next, we can't build without blueprints. This paper is an attempt to recover them.

II. The History of Church and State

A. Constantine and the Prophetic Voice

When Jesus ascended into Heaven, He declared that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him — therefore go, disciple the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything He commanded.² His disciples immediately began preaching to all people, including magistrates, urging them to submit to Christ. Three centuries later, Constantine did that very thing. However messy it was, he publicly submitted to Christ and took steps to honor Him in public policy.

A generation later came a perfect picture of what the church's proper role in politics actually looks like. When Emperor Theodosius brutally crushed a riot in Thessalonica — massacring thousands of civilians — Bishop Ambrose of Milan excommunicated the emperor

¹Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 3.

²Matt. 28:18–20.

and refused him communion until he publicly repented. Theodosius submitted. He did penance. And he subsequently enacted a law requiring a thirty-day delay between a death sentence and its execution.³ That is the Great Commission applied to political life. The church teaching a nation how to obey Jesus. Ambrose was not a governor. He did not appoint the emperor or write legislation. He wielded spiritual authority — the prophetic word — and he wielded it with courage and precision.

B. How Rome Overreached

But as the Western Empire crumbled across the fifth and sixth centuries, church leaders increasingly stepped into the political void. Pope Leo I negotiated Attila the Hun's withdrawal from northern Italy. Gregory the Great administered the city of Rome and brokered peace with the Lombards. These were extraordinary acts of leadership under desperate circumstances. But they set a precedent.

That precedent reached its natural conclusion on Christmas Day, 800 AD, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.⁴ In five centuries, the bishop of Rome had traveled from authoritative moral and prophetic voice to the source of political legitimacy for the highest power in the West. The question was now inescapable: Jesus said to disciple the nations — does this mean great nations must submit to the Pope?

The eleventh century gave the most dramatic answer yet. Pope Gregory VII declared that only the Church could appoint bishops. Emperor Henry IV defied him. Gregory didn't just excommunicate the emperor — he declared that Henry's subjects were no longer bound to obey him, and revolt began to foment.⁵ Henry backed down. He famously traveled to northern Italy and stood barefoot in the snow outside Canossa Castle for three days, seeking forgiveness.⁶ The message was unmistakable: submit to the Pope, or your authority is gone. Only a few years later, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade, and the eclipse seemed complete. The Roman Catholic Church was not just the conscience of Western civilization — it was its commanding officer.

This is the model that Catholic integralists today wish to recover, in various updated forms. But it was a wrong turn then, and it is a wrong turn now. As D. G. Hart has argued from within the Reformed tradition itself, any attempt to route Christ's authority over the nations through an ecclesiastical institution — rather than through His covenant Word — fundamentally

³Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.17–18; Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 315–330.

⁴Thomas F. X. Noble, "Pope Leo III," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 31–35.

⁵Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State, 1050–1300* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 49–50.

⁶*Ibid.*, 57–73.

misconstrues the mission of the church.⁷ The church has a prophetic office. It does not have a governing one.

III. The Magisterial Reformation

A. How Justification by Faith Dismantled Papal Power

The Protestant Reformation is often called the Magisterial Reformation — because it was not merely a doctrinal revolution. It was a reformation of the state and of political power itself.

Here is how that worked. As papal power grew increasingly intertwined with political authority through the Middle Ages, a highly convenient theology of salvation developed alongside it. The Roman Church increasingly answered the question of how saving grace is received with a single word: sacraments. Sacraments administered under the authority of the Pope. Which meant that if you were excommunicated — cut off from those sacraments — there was no hope for your soul, and your political authority was essentially nullified. The Pope held the keys. To everything.

Martin Luther's recovery of justification by faith alone cut that entire structure off at the root. A Christian is justified before God entirely apart from works, sacraments, priests, or any ecclesiastical ritual — by faith alone in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁸ Paul had proclaimed that those whom God justifies cannot be condemned by anyone or anything. Not the Devil, not the Pope, not bishops, nothing can separate them from the love of Christ.⁹ If a Christian's standing before God does not pass through Rome, then Rome's power to grant or revoke political legitimacy is simply an illusion — a very dangerous illusion that had been running the Western world for six hundred years.

The Magisterial Reformers did not deny the church or the sacraments. But they radically reformed what the church was for. Rather than being the central dispenser of grace on earth, the church became one of the great ministries of grace — through the preaching of the Word and the administration of two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Its authority is spiritual and prophetic, not civil and coercive. John Calvin taught that civil magistrates receive their authority directly from Jesus Christ — not from the church, not with the church's permission.¹⁰

This is what Luther and Calvin meant by the Two Kingdoms: the civil sphere and the spiritual sphere are both under God and His Word, both answerable to the Lord Jesus, but each

⁷D. G. Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 10–15.

⁸Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 344–377.

⁹Rom. 8:30–39.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xi.3, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

free within its own domain.¹¹ This is why Protestantism has historically built radically free nations. Cambridge historian Quentin Skinner, writing from entirely secular premises, confirms what the Reformers knew: it was precisely the Calvinist political theology that generated the first coherent theory of constitutional government and popular sovereignty in the modern West.¹²

IV. Covenants, Sacraments, and Nations

A. *Back to the Sources*

One of the great battle cries of the Reformation was *Ad Fontes!* — Back to the sources. Which meant not just the New Testament but the Old Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures — where the Reformers rediscovered the powerful idea of covenant.

Here is the key difference between Rome and Geneva. The Roman Catholic Church, following Thomas Aquinas, opted for a more Aristotelian metaphysic. The Reformers, especially Calvin, opted for a more Hebraic one — grounded in covenant. Michael Horton, one of the foremost contemporary systematizers of Reformed theology, identifies covenant as the basic category through which Scripture itself presents God's relationship with creation and history.¹³ This is not a minor theological preference. It is a fundamentally different picture of how God relates to the world — and it produces a fundamentally different kind of civilization.

We can see this clearly in how each tradition understands the Lord's Supper. Aquinas, channeling Aristotle, taught transubstantiation: while the outward appearances of bread and wine remain, the inner substance is transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Christ by the power of the priest. Grace flows through the institution, through the ordained minister, through the proper performance of the ritual — *ex opere operato*, by the work performed. The priest is the conduit. The church is the pipeline.

Calvin, channeling the Hebrew mind, taught something entirely different. Sacraments are signs and seals of God's covenant promises.¹⁴ Just as God was truly present when He made covenant with Abraham, and Israel ate and drank before God at the foot of Mount Sinai — so too Christ is truly present and received by faith in the Lord's Supper. But the grace is personal, covenantal, and spiritual. It flows directly from Christ through His Spirit to the believing heart. Not through a hierarchy. Not through a priest.¹⁵ That distinction — sacramental mediation versus covenantal directness — is the difference between a church that claims to govern nations and a church that serves them.

¹¹Ibid., IV.xx.1–2.

¹²Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 189–238.

¹³Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 13–34.

¹⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xiv.1–4.

¹⁵Ibid., IV.xiv.6.

B. Covenant Is the Structure of All Human Life

And covenant is not merely a theological doctrine about how grace is received. It is the metaphysical structure of all human life. The whole Bible is organized around a series of binding covenants: God's covenant with Noah, with Abraham, at Sinai through Moses, with David, and the New Covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.¹⁶ This is God's personal bond worked out in the adventure of history — despite human sin and failure, God's sovereign providence leads and loves particular people.

But many other covenants abound in Scripture too, and they are not redemptive covenants: Abraham and Abimelech, Jacob and Laban, David and Jonathan, David and the Elders of Israel making him king, Solomon and Hiram, Josiah and the people.¹⁷ These are social and political covenants. They are real. They are binding. And they are something categorically different from contracts.

A mere contract can be nullified — ripped up and walked away from if both parties agree. A covenant is a solemn oath sworn before God and witnesses, and God personally blesses or curses in history based on how it is kept. A covenant is a metaphysical reality.

The most universal of these social covenants is marriage. It is not merely a contract terminable at will. The Covenant of Marriage is a metaphysical bond — God makes two individuals into one new entity, one household.¹⁸ This is why there is no painless way to end a marriage. Divorce or death — there is always some kind of violence involved. You cannot break a covenant without violence, because you are not canceling an agreement. You are tearing apart something real.

And so it is with civil government. There is a covenant between all rulers and their people under God. Like marriage, there can be common blessings for relatively just governments that honor the natural law — and there are great blessings for those nations that self-consciously seek to obey God's revealed Word. America and the Netherlands were among the first nations in history to build their political life on this Hebraic notion of covenant-nation. That was not a coincidence. That was Protestant theology applied to politics.

Vishal Mangalwadi — an Indian philosopher who came to Christianity from Hinduism and Buddhism, writing from entirely outside the Western tradition — confirms from a global perspective what insiders often miss: the concept of the nation as a covenanted people accountable to God under His Word was a distinctly biblical and Protestant contribution. Neither Eastern Orthodoxy nor Roman Catholicism generated it from within its own institutional logic,

¹⁶Gen. 3:15; 9:9–17; 12:1–3; 15:18; Exod. 19–24; 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Neh. 9–10.

¹⁷Gen. 21:27; 31:44; 1 Sam. 18:3; 2 Sam. 3:12–13; 5:3; 1 Kgs. 5:12; 2 Chr. 15:12; 2 Kgs. 11:17; 23:3.

¹⁸Mal. 2:14–16.

precisely because neither tradition's sacramental structure left room for direct covenantal responsibility between a people and God without clerical mediation.¹⁹

In the Catholic framework, for anything to be truly graced — a marriage, a kingdom, a coronation — the church must be involved. Grace flows through the hierarchy. The Protestant Reformation broke with that entirely. Grace flows from Christ directly, covenantally, through His Spirit, without requiring the church's institutional stamp. Which means civil government does not need the church's permission to be legitimate. It needs to honor its covenant with God.

V. Protestant Resistance Theory and the American Founding

A. The Case for Defying Tyrants

Once you understand covenant as the metaphysical structure of political authority, an explosive question follows naturally: what happens when rulers break their covenant with God and with the people?

Just as a woman may flee — or file for divorce — if her husband has broken covenant, so too the people have a right before God to resist or "divorce" their rulers if those rulers have violated the terms of the civil or national covenant. And crucially: this authorization comes directly from Jesus Christ, with or without the blessing or sacramental action of any church.

This Hebraic-covenantal understanding formed the basis of what became known as Protestant Resistance Theory. Philip Mornay wrote *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos — A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants* — in 1579, in the bloody aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, when Roman Catholic forces slaughtered thousands of French Protestants. His argument was direct: all legitimate civil authority rests on a double covenant — between God, the king, and the people — and a ruler who breaks covenant with God forfeits his claim to the people's obedience.²⁰ No papal permission required. The authorization comes from the covenant itself, from God's own law, activated through the representative institutions of the people.

Samuel Rutherford pressed the argument further in *Lex Rex — The Law and the Prince* — published in 1644 during the British Civil Wars. The king is under the law, not above it. A ruler who breaks covenant may lawfully be resisted.²¹ The book was so dangerous that after the Restoration it was publicly burned and Rutherford was cited for high treason — escaping execution only by dying first. Douglas Kelly's historical study confirms what the Restoration authorities already understood: Calvinist covenant theology was the generative intellectual

¹⁹Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), xv–xx.

²⁰Philippe de Mornay (attrib.), *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (1579), ed. and trans. George Garnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xli–xlii.

²¹Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex: The Law and the Prince* (1644; repr. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2020), Question XIV.

source of constitutional liberty in the Western world.²² Quentin Skinner further demonstrates that the Calvinist revolutionaries — the Huguenots, Beza, Mornay — transformed what began as a specifically religious duty to resist into a genuinely political, natural right of popular sovereignty. That transformation is the proximate historical origin of modern constitutional government.²³

B. The Declaration as a Protestant Document

This is the tradition that crossed the Atlantic and planted itself in the American colonies. Historians estimate that Protestants constituted over 98 percent of the American colonial population, and covenant theology shaped their political self-understanding at every level.²⁴ Bernard Bailyn's Pulitzer Prize-winning study of the ideological origins of the American Revolution confirms it: Puritan covenant theology was one of the decisive intellectual streams shaping the colonial mind, giving colonists a theological grammar for reading British policy as a systematic breach of covenant-given liberties.²⁵ Mark David Hall's scholarship pushes the same conclusion: the American founders were influenced in significant ways by Protestant, particularly Reformed and Puritan, Christian ideas when they declared independence, drafted constitutions, and established religious liberty.²⁶

The Declaration of Independence is a thoroughly covenantal document — and therefore a Protestant document. Its structure follows the precise literary form of a covenant lawsuit: invoke the divine Lawgiver, enumerate the specific covenant-breaking grievances of the offending party, declare the dissolution of the political bond on those grounds.²⁷ It was, in the most exact sense, a Protestant writ of divorce from the British Crown — a covenantal act of resistance, authorized not by any pope, not by any church, but by the law of God Himself, written into the nature of political covenants from the beginning.

VI. The Enlightenment Virus and Its Consequences

A. A Social Contract Is Not a Covenant

But a virus was inserted into the system. The so-called Enlightenment was a broad movement of thinkers and writers who agreed that human reason — not God's Word, not covenantal faithfulness — was the key to national peace, individual rights, and human progress. Religion needed to take a back seat. Reason needed to take the political wheel.

²²Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 1–20.

²³Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, 302–348.

²⁴Tony Williams, "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God, and the American Declaration of Independence," *Constituting America* (2021).

²⁵Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 26–54.

²⁶Mark David Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding? Separating Modern Myth from Historical Truth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 45–78.

²⁷The Declaration of Independence, para. 2 (U.S. 1776).

John Locke represents the most conservative version of this shift. He wrote in favor of a "social contract" — which sounds a great deal like a covenant. It involves consent, mutual obligation, and grounds for dissolution. But Locke had subtly jettisoned the explicitly biblical and Christian foundation for it all. Where the Reformed tradition grounded original sin in Adam's broken covenant, Locke proposed that human beings are born with a blank slate.²⁸ Where Rutherford grounded resistance in the law of God, Locke grounded it in a humanistic natural reason available to anyone, of any religion or none.²⁹

Classical liberalism in the Lockean sense is the attempt to build a vaguely Christian social structure without explicit reference to the Triune God, His Word, or His covenant. Because it was born inside the era of rich Protestant covenantal thinking, it shares many of the same ideals — limited government, individual rights, the right of resistance. But it was built on a humanistic foundation. And as Patrick Deneen has argued, liberalism fails not because it fell short of its ideals but because it was true to them. Radical individual autonomy, cut off from the pre-liberal sources of moral formation — family, church, covenant, Scripture — is its own undoing.³⁰

B. Identity Politics Is Protestant Heresy

That humanistic cancer really did get into the Protestant bloodstream. And that is why we are facing the insanity of identity politics in modern culture.

Identity politics is a uniquely Protestant cancer — as political theorist Joshua Mitchell has argued in careful detail.³¹ It reproduces the grammar of Protestant theology while gutting its theological content. In place of Adam's broken covenant and original sin, white male heterosexual Protestants become the "original sinners" — guilty by birth, guilty by history, guilty without possibility of acquittal except through political confession and submission to the new elect. In place of righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ, the righteous are the oppressed: former slaves, people of color, sexual minorities, abuse survivors. This is not liberalism gone wrong. It is Calvinism without Christ — a theological skeleton wearing a political skin.

Many conservative Roman Catholics want to identify this entire pathology with Protestantism as such, and conclude that the cure is Catholic integralism. But that diagnosis is too easy. The disease is not Protestant theology — it is Protestant theology's Enlightenment corruption. And Catholics like Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden make abundantly clear that the same corruption has infected large swaths of Roman Catholicism. Recent popes have sometimes encouraged it. The disease is not Protestant. It is modern.

²⁸John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Book II, ch. 1, §2.

²⁹John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Second Treatise, §§95–99, 222.

³⁰Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 29–55.

³¹Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020), 16–18.

VII. Common Ground and Final Reckoning

Catholic integralists and Protestant covenantalists agree on the essentials: nations and civil governments must be oriented toward God. Morality is inescapable. Christian morality is what is best for every nation. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."³² In the current cultural battle, many conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics will stand on the same side — fighting together to end abortion, resist the redefinition of marriage and sex, and push back against the cultural revolution that is dismantling everything we have inherited.

That common front is real and valuable. Catholics have always been welcome contributors to the American project. In the providence of God, they may help build good nations. This paper does not dispute any of that.

What it disputes is the stronger claim — that America must become Roman Catholic to be renewed. And it disputes the underlying model: that Christ's lordship over the nations must be mediated through an institutional church rather than through the direct authority of His covenantal Word.

The difference is this. When grace flows through the hierarchy of the church to the state, the state must answer to the hierarchy — as Henry IV learned barefoot in the snow at Canossa. When grace flows through Christ's covenantal Word directly, the state answers to Christ — and the church's role is prophetic and ministerial, not governing. The first model gave us the Crusades and Canossa. The second gave us the Declaration of Independence.

VIII. Conclusion

America is a thoroughly Protestant nation. It was settled by explorers and pilgrims who had the adventure of providential and covenantal history in their bones. It was shaped by the theology Luther rediscovered, Calvin systematized, the Huguenots and Scottish Covenanters applied to political resistance, and the American founders — overwhelmingly Protestant, steeped in a covenant-saturated political imagination — enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.

The argument that America's crisis is Martin Luther's fault is precisely backwards. The crisis is the fruit of abandoning the Protestant covenantal foundation in favor of an Enlightenment secularism that kept the political forms of Protestant civilization while discarding their theological substance. You cannot keep the Declaration of Independence once you throw out the God who makes the declaration meaningful.

The cure is not to trade one form of ecclesiastical control for another. The cure is to recover what was there from the beginning: Christ's direct and immediate lordship over family,

³²Ps. 33:12.

church, and state — mediated not through the Pope, not through any institution, but through His covenantal Word written in Scripture.

Catholics may be welcome and valuable partners in this work. In God's providence, they may help build good nations. But great nations — nations that endure, that generate freedom rather than merely imposing order, that build rather than merely manage — are built on fidelity to the supremacy of God's Word.

America has been a great nation not because it was under any Church, but because it was a nation under Christ and His covenantal Word. That is the blueprint. Whatever comes next, we cannot build without it.

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