



A Christian Primer

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Prophet Paine

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Thomas Paine was the most influential writer in history. I know that is a rather weighty introductory statement. But I stand behind it. His work was the catalyst which brought humanity out of eighteen centuries of dark ages and oppression. Like any great, he is standing on the shoulders of giants—the Magna Carta (1215), Martin Luther's 95 thesis (1517) and the Mayflower Compacts (1620) were enormous strides towards freedom; smaller works were jabs in the face of tyranny, but Thomas Paine delivered the knock out blows.

Over the years, some of my friends have inquired as to why I celebrate Thomas Paine. One friend is a missionary in New York City, and the other attended Taylor University with me. Their remarks are similar, and valid. Part 1 will contain my responses. Part 2, "Prophet Paine" is a biblical examination of the man. Defending the sufficiency of Christ, is as strenuous as defending freedom.

Part 1, fair rebuke

Original message from Gary Rowland:

"What's up, bro! I came across this quote from Thomas Paine. Since you're the leading expert on the guy (at least in my circles), I wanted to get your opinion of this and how this affects his posterity as a prophet: "The opinions I have advanced ... are the effect of the most clear and long-established conviction that the Bible and the Testament are impositions upon the world, that the fall of man, the account of Jesus Christ being the Son of God, and of his dying to appease the wrath of God, and of salvation, by that strange means, are all fabulous inventions, dishonorable to the wisdom and power of the Almighty; that the only true religion is Deism, by which I then meant, and mean now, the belief of one God, and an imitation of his moral character, or the practice of what are called moral virtues – and that it was upon this only (so far as religion is concerned) that I rested all my hopes of happiness hereafter. So say I now – and so help me God."

My initial short hand, reply to Gary (shortened but not changed):

"It gets worse—fully renouncing the validity and message of the Gospel in his later work, "Age of Reason". We know that the Puritan's came here for Religious liberty—they were being killed and persecuted terribly in England. We also know that Paine was born after the first great awakening (1730-1755); Paine never heard the great sermons preached in America since he was born in 1737. Then, after independence, he was back in France during the reign of Terror when the second great awakening started in 1790. So, Paine might have missed all that preaching. All Paine ever saw as far as 'Christianity' was the brutal oppression of Monarchy and Theocracy in Europe, and the many divisions of denominations in America. He saw mostly the bad. Also, his skepticism of the Gospel was likely from the weakness of Christians, who might not fight in war, or might not see that God actually used men like him to be the answer to prayers.

I've never met a Christian with Paine's principle, so it's likely he formed a type of self-righteousness from his stellar character and moral posture. Paine did not own slaves, take financial bribes for office... Impeccable character. Though, I won't hide from the truth: all prophecy is revelation of Jesus Christ ... I believe a man like Paine had a good Christian priest at his death bed, sharing him the source of all the freedom he fought so vigilantly for."

Original message from Brother Tim

"You do realize Thomas pain was opposed to Christianity. He is a philosopher not a church writer. He wrote doctrinal stuff, but he was a Deist who believed in a God, but assumes God has nothing to do with his people, so therefore puts more emphasis on man's Supreme nature over God's unattached care for his creation. He was also a rationalist who put human reason above scripture. Ya he writes well, but he is putting his human reason in the place of God and therefore is in danger of the seat of the Antichrist, where scripture should hold the highest authority. When you use hold Han reason to explain scripture and God's inscrutable will you are denying Isaiah 55.8."

My thoughtful, iterative response to Tim's objections

"Paine was opposed to Christianity":

Paine supported religious liberty, which then, was primarily Christian (many flavors), or those friendly towards it (deism in rare cases). Above all, Paine believed the central tenant of Christian living, which was the golden rule: *"...my country is the world, and my religion is to do good"*. (*Rights of Man* 1790)

What better way to love your neighbor than to free them from tyranny? Paine supported Christian diversity in America. He knew this was the answer to the despotism in Europe (aka Church of England). He never rebuked a Christian's values, rather he provoked their Christian hypocrisy: *"What sort of men or Christians must you suppose the Americans to be, who, after seeing their most humble petitions insultingly rejected; the most grievous laws passed to distress them in every quarter; an undeclared war let loose upon them..."* (*American Crisis*, October 20, 1778)

Paine supported Christians in government, because he knew if they stopped quarrelling about matters of doctrine, they would create the greatest nation ever conceived: *"I am inclined to believe that what is called the present ministry, wish to see contentions about religion kept up, to prevent the nation turning its attention to subjects of government. It is as if they were to say, 'Look that way, or any way, but this.'"* (*Rights of Man*). This leads to your next point, as

"Paine not being a Church writer:"

Paine reignited the original doctrine of independence, which sits on biblical bedrock. His first work, 'Common Sense' was the most consequential (and successful) published document in American History. He opens with a paraphrase of what theologians call 'the depravity of man': *"Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness...For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform, and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other lawgiver;"* (*Opening remarks in 'Common Sense'*)

Paine references the canon throughout—the Exodus, the story of Samuel, David and Gideon. The below Example is not only biblical, but a near mirror image to the Christian struggle—independence was akin with the protestant reformation. Governmental abuse was the driver for the Exodus (1500 BC), the reformation (1517), and American independence (1766-1783):

"Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The Heathens paid divine honors to their deceased kings, and the christian world hath improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones. How impious is the title of sacred majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!

As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings. All anti-monarchical parts of scripture have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchical governments, but they undoubtedly merit the attention of countries which have their governments yet to form. "Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's" is the scripture doctrine of courts, yet it is no support of monarchical government, for the Jews at that time were without a king, and in a state of vassalage to the Romans.

Near three thousand years passed away from the Mosaic account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king. Till then their form of government (except in extraordinary cases, where the Almighty interposed) was a kind of republic administred by a judge and the elders of the tribes. Kings they had none, and it was held sinful to

acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of Hosts. And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of Kings, he need not wonder, that the Almighty ever jealous of his honor, should disapprove of a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven.

Monarchy is ranked in scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them. The history of that transaction is worth attending to.” (Common Sense: Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession)

Certainly, the temporal establishment of government, even on a biblical model is not to be equated with the salvation of a man’s soul; yet we don’t get to diminish any of God’s Word.

“Putting human reason above scripture:”

Common Sense is the marriage of reason and Holy writ. Paine dumps paragraphs of verbatim scripture directly from the books of Samuel and Judges (see Common Sense). God is rational and reasonable (1 Peter 3:15). I have not read Paine’s “Age of Reason” quite yet, but there is an endless list of verses which could likely support the bulk of that work, namely the Proverbs. God is also a mystery, one which Paine might not have grasped, namely the cross. Perhaps Paine was just pretending to be a Christian, knowing that his audience was predominately disposed to accepting the bible as authoritative. But considering what he endured, I don’t think this was an effort to “stick it to the man by way of the Word”. His passion for colonial unity, especially among the brethren is like a political prayer (John 17) that brings me to tears.

“I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but on every state: up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel; better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it. Say not that thousands are gone, turn out your tens of thousands; throw not the burden of the day upon Providence, but “show your faith by your works,” that God may bless you.”

The Church is good at making enemies out of each other, and Paine spoke to that. The Church in Britain was good at making enemies of any nation whatsoever, and Paine would not allow the American Christians to be involved in her wars. At one point, Paine rebuked the King for suggesting that the Americans should enlist in the British army if they wished to be in their “rightful place”. Paine replied, *“Can Bedlam, in concert with Lucifer, form a more mad and devilish request? Were it possible a people could sink into such apostacy they would deserve to be swept from the earth like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. The proposition is an universal affront to the rank which man holds in the creation, and an indignity to him who placed him there. It supposes him made up without a spark of honor, and under no obligation to God or man.”*

More biblical theology—Paine taught the existence of Satan. Call it angelology or demonology, Paine made it real to his audience: *“We have a perfect idea of a natural enemy when we think of the devil, because the enmity is perpetual, unalterable and unabateable. It admits, neither of peace, truce, or treaty; consequently the warfare is eternal, and therefore it is natural. But man with man cannot arrange in the same opposition...The Creator of man did not constitute them the natural enemy of each other. Even wolves may quarrel, still they herd together”*

How many Christian denominations today reject the doctrine of independence (America and Israel as acts of God), or even the existence of a devil? The mystery of the gospel might have puzzled Paine, even unto death (but I cannot speculate into his heart); however, if the finished work of the cross is Paine’s missing doctrine, then rest assured, total depravity (Romans 3:23, Jeremiah 17:9) is the missing doctrine in the Church today. People who believe they are not fallen, will likely fall into the trap of Monarchy—this is what the Churches have done—they have built castles and denominational walls which has rendered America a republic of ecclesiastical kings. Instead of preaching Christ crucified, they are trying to expand their kingdoms—they compete for congregants (modern peasants), resources (land, tithes, buildings), and influence (conferences and coalitions). They go to war with neighboring kingdoms and call it “apologetics”. They hide from politics and call it “the kingdom”. They rarely preach repentance, and how Jesus has changed their life. Americans on the fringe don’t know the basic gospel, and how Christ can set them free.

What is the result? An American society swarming with people thinking they can build a better world—not just a world apart from Christ, but a government opposite to the biblical model. While the Church is disputing about doctrine in their religious silos (early point made in ‘Rights of Man’), the people (would be converts to Jesus) are rallying to build another despotic government over us all (sinners and saints). While the Christians are divided in matters of worship,

liturgy, eschatology and sacraments, God the father is crying (a summary of Paine's closing parable in 'Rights of Man'). That is a mystery itself: how a non-Christian (not proven) is more effective in teaching biblical theology than the entire Western ecclesiastical conglomerate.

Full Review of Paine's biblical alignments: *The total depravity of man, the need for Godly government, the golden rule, the reality of Satan, and now, God as a parent who loves our worship, and even our father who is anguished when we fight? Paine amazes.*

"And here without anger or resentment I bid you farewell. Sincerely wishing, that as men and christians, ye may always fully and uninterruptedly enjoy every civil and religious right; and be, in your turn, the means of securing it to others; but that the example which ye have unwisely set, of mingling religion with politics, may be disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of America." (End of Common Sense)

Paine's influence is inarguably hall of fame grade, but his life was so congruent with scripture, that I'm almost inclined to make him a Patron Saint, on the faith that he accepted Christ in his last moments.

Part 2, Prophet Paine

Thomas Paine was a messenger from God. As an Old Testament prophet, he was never wrong (Deuteronomy 18:21). His doctrine for independence came to pass, and has yet to be unraveled.

"The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now..."
(Common Sense, 1776)

And our proceedings were successful. America has digressed tremendously (especially with abortion), but no nation in history can boast more freedom, prosperity, and most importantly, Christian charity and global missions. Common Sense continued:

"I am not induced by motives of pride, party, or resentment to espouse the doctrine of separation and independance; I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that it is the true interest of this continent to be so; that every thing short of that is mere patchwork, that it can afford no lasting felicity,—that it is leaving the sword to our children, and shrinking back at a time, when, a little more, a little farther, would have rendered this continent the glory of the earth."

Once they received him, they got the reward (Matthew 10:41). We won the American Revolution. At this phase, Paine functioned as a New Testament, "make me feel good and encourage me" type. The praise giving prophet is most desired by pastors today (1 Corinthians 14:3). He authored a series of encouraging letters titled 'The American Crisis'. Washington ordered that they be read to the solders at Valley Forge. It got them through a tough time.

"Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated." (Letter 1, December 23, 1775)

Do these still encourage us? What do Christians today take for granted? What did he mean, "Heaven knows how to price its goods?" Why do Christians think that freedom is not part of our Christian experience and duty? By 1776 we declared it, and by 1865 we refined it in fire. By 1903, the Wright brothers achieved flight and by 1947 we secured world freedom. The 50's marked the largest middle class in world history. The 60's were rough, but we stayed the course; then, the 1990's burgeoned forth—the cold war was over, personal computing was in many households, and mere mortals were flying without wings (Michael Jordan). The space race was won, we dominated in the Olympics, and even the moral majority rallied around Reagan. We were "the glory of the earth".

Prophetic prowess

At intervals, Paine taunted and demoralized the enemy of God, just like the prophet Elijah at Mt. Carmel. (1 Kings 18:27-29). When addressing the prideful or the wicked, he resorted to sarcasm, like the prophet Micaiah (1 Kings 22:15-16). Like the prophet Moses, he led a revolution out of bondage, often without the support of his own people and peers (Acts 7:25). Like the apostle Paul (also a prophet, Acts 15:32).

Paine wrote letters from prison, hoping to free the nation of France. He was an 18th century John the Baptist, voice in the wilderness—preaching repentance from insanity. It nearly cost him his head. Authoring “Age of Reason” from within an 8x10’ cell, Paine watched inmates get drug away to the guillotine during the French Reign of terror. This travelling and persecution would almost elevate him into the apostolic, as he was building nations; nations which would grow into Christian-influenced powers and super-powers. He did these things far from his hometown of Thetford, England (Matthew 13:57).

He died a prophet’s death. For instance, twenty thousand attended Benjamin Franklin’s funeral. Paine’s funeral? Not an empty casket, but an empty venue, empty of both body and bones with a mere six in attendance. Moses, picking his own date of death, left Michael the archangel (recorded in Jude 1:9) to dispute with Satan over his remains. Paine? No remains found, other than his books, his monuments...*and the free world—the consequence of his literary brilliance*. Moses’ most fitting acclaim could be extracted from Paul Collins’ description from *The Trouble with Tom: The Strange Afterlife and Time of Thomas Paine* assigning him the title, “A walking revolution”.

Now I understand that Paine might not have openly declared a trust in Jesus Christ during his life. I truly hope he made that decision on his deathbed. However, does his ministry not remain in keeping with the canonical standard? Balaam was declared a prophet, yet he cursed Israel for money (Numbers 22)—Paine only blessed peaceful countries. He didn’t curse America for money, but donated the proceeds of his work. Paine was a credible “not for profit” prophet.

Jerimiah and Isaiah spoke of a messiah they never saw fully revealed. Is Paine held to a higher standard? Certainly, there was a full gospel available in his day. Yet why do we revere kings like Solomon, who might have fallen from grace in latter days? How can the wisest man accept the sinful office of a king? (1 Samuel 12:19), dismissing the basic tenants of his own bible (Deuteronomy 17)? Paine was monogamous and virtuous.

If not receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ is a pre-requisite for being declared apostate, or getting your writings rebuked, then bye bye with Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel and Amos. See you later David—you were only a murderer; we can never learn from you, though you prophesied a coming Messiah (Psalms 23) who would suffer, and kept the kingdom together for forty years. Samson? Just a lustful Nazirite. Rahab? Just a whore. Their faith does not redeem them. So off with your head Thomas Paine—you faithless Unchristian philosopher who would call all Americans to bleed for a nation that would share more Jesus than Constantine’s Rome!

Is it possible that Paine was a Christian by “omission”, meaning, he believed in Christ sub-consciously and accidentally? After all, the demons do God’s will (1 Kings 22:20-21). Maybe he decided to avoid the ‘Daniel in Babylon’ predicament, and foraged lands unto freedom; to be a liberator of worlds and not a subject of the state; lands lush with liberty, which, is just another word for Jesus (Leviticus 25, Galatians 5:1). I will close with my favorite quote from Thomas Paine:

“But such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing.”

Interchanging the word “truth” with “Jesus” (John 14:6), we might discover that Christ’s only request of many now, is to understand that the country, the “cause of greatest worth”, cannot be separated from her King. Paine writes,

“But where says some is the King of America? I’ll tell you Friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Britain.”

And if were Paine here today, one might ask him: “how has this invisible King become so magnified in your understanding?” to which I would answer, the cross—the cross is the clincher of American sovereignty; the country and the cross and the king, should not be so divided, as

“The cause of America..” (The old rugged cross) “...is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”