

## **Faith of our Founding Fathers – Thomas Jefferson**

*By Robert Duffett, President  
Dakota Wesleyan University  
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A note Thomas Jefferson wrote, discovered after his death on July 4, 1826, suggested an appropriate epitaph for his gravestone:

“Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

Of all his accomplishments, governor of Virginia, diplomat to France, first secretary of state for George Washington, vice president for John Adams, and two-term president of the United States, he wanted posterity to remember him as an author and educator!

Some argue America is a Christian nation. In part, they are correct. The Congregational and Anglican/Episcopalian Churches were the established churches in most of the Colonies before the Revolutionary War (1776-1783). Established churches enjoyed a privileged status before the war, legally recognized as part of the Colonial government except in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. Ministerial salaries and church buildings were paid for by taxpayers. Members of dissenting churches (any church other than the Congregational Church in New England or the Anglican/Episcopalian Church in the South) could be fined for *not* attending the established church and mandated to *pay* taxes to it. Established churches were funded much like the state of South Dakota funds its public school system. Jefferson thought this was untenable, sinful and tyrannical. His statute sought to end this church/state relationship.

Throughout his life Jefferson was brutally attacked for his religious beliefs, or lack thereof. Political opponents and clergy often hurled epithets of atheist, Deist, infidel, irreligious, anti-church and anti-God. There is no evidence that Jefferson was an atheist, Deist, anti-Christian or anti-church. His life, writings and those who knew him suggest facts to the contrary. He was born, baptized, married and buried in the Anglican/Episcopalian Church. He was a lifelong, regular church attendee, both in Monticello and as president in Washington, D.C. He studied religion all his life. He even wrote his own version of the first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He completed it while in the White House. This “Jefferson Bible” was his attempt to preserve the pure teachings and morals of Jesus from the corrupting influence of clergy dogma and church hierarchy. Although he was critical of clergy and their power, he had several clergy friends.

Jefferson agreed and dissented with evangelical Christian theology. He did not believe in the Trinity, atonement or miracles. He did believe in prayer, divine providence in the world and the afterlife. Indeed, he was a person of faith and knowledgeable about religion.

His Statute for Religious Freedom had three goals: disestablish the Anglican/Episcopal Church in Virginia; repeal all laws that interfered with the freedom of worship, and assure that no future state government would have any authority in religious matters. When his bill was introduced by James Madison in the 1784-1785 legislative session, Jefferson was in France.

Contrary to his critics, he did not think his statute would destroy faith or the church, but free both from the corrupting clutches of an alliance of church and state. Jefferson thought disestablishing the church would, ironically, make it stronger and its clergy more effective.

His Declaration of 1776 disestablished the political bonds between England and her American colonies. His statute of 1784 disestablished the religious bonds between church and state. Could it be that “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” necessitates the freedom to believe or not believe, attend church or merely watch the NFL on Sunday?

There is a historical twist that should not be missed. Those who were most enthusiastic to separate church and state in the 1770s were Baptists, evangelicals and direct heirs of the First Great Awakening. Why were Baptists and evangelicals so fond of Jefferson? Why did Baptist leader John Leland become a “Jefferson itinerant” and campaign for him in the 1800 presidential election? Why did the Baptists of Cheshire, Massachusetts make and deliver to Jefferson at the White House a 1,200 pound congratulatory cheese? And finally, why did the Danbury Baptists rejoice that Jefferson promised, in his famous letter to them, a high wall of “separation between church and state?” Jefferson, the Baptists and evangelicals at that time saw several profound political and religious insights – often missed today by many Evangelicals and the religious right.

The most important political right is religious freedom. Authentic faith is a private matter between God and the individual. The state should never, ever be given another opportunity to “nuzzle” its way between the individual and God.