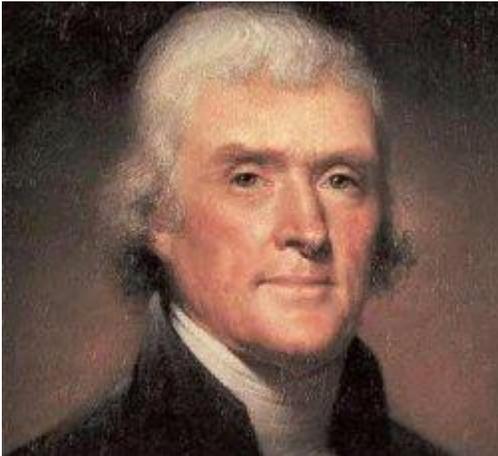


## Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)



**Key Result:** “Architect of the Declaration of Independence”

### Key Background Information:

- ◆ Not raised in a religious home
- ◆ Age 16 he enters the College of William and Mary, becoming intrigued with Enlightenment science
- ◆ Inherited a vast estate of over 5000 acres and 40 slaves at age 22
- ◆ Experienced much family tragedies the next year, making him more of a loner
- ◆ Had a very happy marriage which ended in 1782 with her untimely death from diabetes, sending Jefferson into depression and isolation as well as loneliness for some time.
- ◆ Practiced law for a period of time, before becoming a Planter
- ◆ Monticello had a tremendous library which aided his education
- ◆ As typical with so many, his early views are less sympathetic to Christianity than the more mature Jefferson (a fact frequently overlooked by secularists and humanists who use this to propagate their views).

### Key Events

- ◆ 1776- the principle framer of the Declaration of Independence in a committee of five which included John Adams, Ben Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Roger Livingston. The current version went through over a 100 edits from the committee and the Continental Congress.
- ◆ 1780- Presidential election against John Adams in which his religious views came to the forefront. Jefferson came under attack for not attending church and for his Enlightenment views of religion, often appearing to be an opponent of the Faith. Dutch Reformed pastor William Linn of New York wrote a pamphlet favoring Adams, who was a consistent church-goer and more clear in his faith (though Adams was more a Unitarian himself than an orthodox believer). His supporters

responded that in fact Jefferson was a true Christian, rejecting that he was a Deist. He himself rejected the label of Deist, and considered himself a Christian.

## Key Ideas

- ◆ Contrary to popular opinion, Jefferson was not even in the United States when the Constitution and Bill of Rights were written. The “establishment of religion” article was written by a younger protégé of Jefferson, James Madison, also a Virginian (but not at Jefferson’s urging, but of that from John Leland and Virginia Baptists). The original Constitution as presented had no bill of rights. It was impressed upon Madison that Virginia Baptists wanted more assurances that the nation would not reestablish either Congregationalism or Episcopalianism, which were the primary denominations of many of the movers and shakers of the Constitution.
- ◆ He becomes known through those who hold a more strict separationist view of church and state for an expression he uses to Kentucky Baptists in the Danbury Association. As President, the Baptists were still not totally convinced that the nation might revert back to an establishment of a particular denomination. In response, Jefferson makes it clear that the Constitution and bill of rights have established “a wall of separation between church and state.” What he actually meant was not a strict separation of church and state envisioned by secularists, Humanists, and others. In the next few sentences after that statement, he boldly says, it’s not the responsibility of the President “to command the Faith of the people, but to commend the Faith to the people.” In other words, no particular denomination of the Faith was to lord it over the other, because of the wall of separation. However, neither should the President be neutral in matters of the Faith: he should commend the Faith to the people! \\\
- ◆ To evidence that Jefferson not only believed the President should commend the Faith to the people in word, he also did it in action. While President, he took his own Bible and walked to church each Sunday in clear view of the public. In addition, he had congress print Bibles (the King James Version) to be used in schools and for missionaries in the frontier regions.... Hardly an act of someone who follows the ‘strict separationist’ view of church and state. Jefferson’s main issue with traditional Christianity was over the doctrine of the Trinity. He knew church history to some extent, enough to cite the decision of the Council of Nicaea in 325, in which Athanasius’ defense of the full deity of Christ was affirmed in opposition to Arius, who believed Christ was a “second God.” He, as a rationalist, could not accept the paradox of “three persons in one essence.” For him, it was more geometry that did not work.
- ◆ Lord Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), an English deist, was a lifelong favorite of Jefferson. In his *Literary Commonplace Book*, a volume compiled mostly in the 1760s, Jefferson copied extracts from various authors, transcribing from Bolingbroke some 10,000 words, six times as much as from any other author and forty percent of the whole volume. Young Jefferson was particularly partial to Bolingbroke's observations on religion and morality.
- ◆ Dr/ Joseph Priestly will lead him to divide the Jesus of Nazareth, a greater teacher and a great man, from the Christ of the Church, the sum total of Church councils

- and creed ( a forerunner of the current debate over the “mythologizing of Jesus by the church” typified in the Jesus Seminar).
- ◆ Jefferson also rejected any concept of Inerrancy of the Bible, and believed it was the most inspired book but not the product of divine inspiration. Believed that the Book of Revelation had not place in the Bible because it lacked any sense of reason and logic
  - ◆ Unlike Franklin, he never showed any sympathy for Whitefield and the Great Awakening
  - ◆ Unlike Washington, who educated and released his slaves, Jefferson never did so, and apparently had an illegitimate child of a slave

**Key Works:**

- ◆ Massive volumes of his letters and journals