

# William Penn (1644-1718)



## Key Designations:

- ◆ Father of Religious Liberty in America
- ◆ Founder of “Penn’s Wood Colony” (Pennsylvania).

## Key Background Information:

- ◆ Penn converted to become a Quaker (Society of Friends) based on the preaching of Thomas Loe.
- ◆ Quakers were among the most persecuted in England, and fled to the colonies.
- ◆ Penn would become a preacher, and landed in prison for three years.
- ◆ Traveled and preached with George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends.
- ◆ Penn’s father was a famous admiral, whom King Charles was indebted. As a result, the crown being low on finances, deeded land in the new world over to his son, William. It comprised all the land between Maryland and New York. A year later he was also granted land from which became the state of Delaware. But Pennsylvania will be known from this time forward as the “Quaker State.”

## Key Ideas:

- ◆ As a result of his own persecutions, he came to reject an established denomination of Christianity, thus becoming the first advocate of religious freedom.
- ◆ Pennsylvania will be the first colony that openly allowed all religious dissenters and non-conformists to settle there and freely practice their faith.
- ◆ Penn’s state wasn’t open territory to “rebels, reprobates, and unbelievers.” He established basic laws that all Christians would accept which forbade “all unchristian... practices.” Penn believed in freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. His view was the basic view adopted by the Founders and the Constitution.
- ◆ Penn believed that Church and State should accommodate one another. No one denomination should control others, by forcing laws such as taxations, denominational tests for public office, preferential ordinations, etc. However, he believed the state should cooperate with basic Christianity in establishing a government based on biblical principles. “Make and establish such laws as shall best preserve true Christian and civil liberty, in all opposition to all unchristian... practices.” The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania will constantly affirm the Faith over the next century.
- ◆ Strongly believed in cooperation and unity among believers which inspired his name “City of (Christian) Brotherly Love” for his capital known city, Philadelphia.

## Key Works:

- ◆ *No Cross, No Crown (1668)*: written during a time of imprisonment in the Tower of London, he compares the Quaker sufferings to those of Christ and the early apostles.
- ◆ *Travels in Holland and Germany*: A journal of his sojourns with George Fox.

- ◆ *Frame of the Government (1662)*: Became the seminal document for not only the charters of other states, but also greatly influenced the Founding Fathers a century later. Government has the responsibility to instruct in reading and writing so that every citizen might learn the Word of God for themselves by the age of 12.
- ◆ *Charter of Privileges (1701)*: Uses more “official” language for God, commonly used by those in places of authority, i.e. “Almighty God,” “ Lord of Conscience,” “Author... of all Divine Knowledge,” and “Creator, Upholder, and Ruler of the world.” Any person who professes to believe in Christ, no matter what his sect, should be allowed to serve in the government. “No people can be truly happy, though under the greatest enjoyment of civil liberties, if abridged of...their religious profession and worship....”
- ◆ *Letter to Peter the Great, Czar of Russia*: “Those who will not be governed by God will be ruled by tyrants.”

### **Key Results:**

Typical of all the attitudes of the Founding Fathers of the United States, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1824 finds against a well-known skeptic, Abner Updegraph. Updegraph had condemned the Bible as full of myths, legends, and fables though it has many great things. He was found guilty of insulting the Christian populace: “even if Christianity is not part of the law of the land, it is the popular religion of the country, and insult on which would be indictable....” It rejected the position that Christianity has no place in the public domain. “Christianity, general Christianity, is and always has been a part of the common law, not Christianity founded on any particular religious tenets, not Christianity with an established Church, but Christianity with liberty of conscience to all men...” This remains one of the best explanations of the Founder’s view of the Accommodation of Church and State.

The Court goes on to say that a strict separation of church and state: “the promulgation of such opinions, and general receipt of them among the people, would be the sure forerunners of anarchy, and finally, of despotism....While our own free constitution secures liberty of conscience and freedom of religious worship to all, it is not necessary to maintain that any man should have the right publicly to vilify the religion of his neighbors, and of the country: these two privileges are directly opposed.”

### **Conclusions:**

Many of the Founders of Christian faith in America have been inaccurately described as “liberals” and “religious radicals.” However, very clearly their focus was on becoming more fundamental bible-believing Christians. They believed that the Anglican Church had strayed from the New Testament, nearly as much as the Roman Catholic Church. They had neither intention of being ‘rebels,’ nor would they agree with the observation that they represented “left-wing Protestantism” (see William Sweet. *The American Churches: An Interpretation*, 1947, pp.2-3)

The Founders of American considered themselves as a “throwback” to the Bible, and were very conservative in the ethics, whether they were Puritans, Separatists, Baptists, Quakers, etc.

In fact, it was the Anglican Church which held a more “liberal” viewpoint in that advocated dogma not found in the New Testament. The liberal course of the Episcopal Church in America will validate this observation as time goes on up to the present time.