

The American Revolution



Amendment 1: Restrictions on Powers of Congress

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The United States Constitution

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution ("make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof") guaranteed each citizen of the U.S. the right to practice his or her own religion. That was a new idea for most of the world. Further, its placement before the other guaranteed freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and petition demonstrates how important the founders of the United States felt it was. It is still important today not only because it guarantees the freedom of religion, but also because it prohibits the establishment of a state religion.

Why Is the Establishment Clause Important?

By the time of the American Revolution, there were many well-organized religious groups in the colonies that supported national independence. Many of them had developed because of state-church abuses in Europe, causing the founders to worry about a state-supported American church. This helps to explain the need for the Establishment Clause. While Americans wanted to support religious and moral values, they did not want it promoted by an official state church.

The Establishment Clause was a compromise. Prior to this time, the religion of the ruler or ruling class was also required of the people. This was the case even after the Reformation called into question the power of the Roman church. In fact, the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) was the result of the Roman, Lutheran, and Reformed princes' disagreement over this issue. These attitudes, along with Enlightenment thinking, led to the Establishment Clause. It was intended to keep religion from becoming a governmental function.

The current description of a separation between church and state defines this compromise. Religious ideas should be heard and debated in society, but the government should not support any one set of religious beliefs or force it upon the people.

The Historical Context

Many American churches encouraged the Revolution. They usually featured a more democratic congregational practice than European churches. Many people had fled to America to worship freely. Others were eager to be independent from European churches, which they saw as corrupt. Most citizens held a faith in God and a morality driven by that faith, but they did not want the church controlling public decision making.

The thinking behind the Enlightenment or Age of Reason provided additional pressure for the Establishment Clause. This new think-

ing made human reason the source of truth. Enlightenment thinkers were uncomfortable with the church exerting official pressures on the government. Many were Deists, maintaining a new and different view of God.

In Service to Both God and Country

One person who made significant contributions to both his church and country was a Lutheran pastor named Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who arrived in America in 1742. Seen as the patriarch of Lutheranism in America, Pastor Muhlenberg helped organize many Lutheran churches and schools. In 1748, he established the Pennsylvania Ministerium, an organization that helped to establish common worship practices and governance among American Lutherans.

Two of Muhlenberg's sons, also Lutheran pastors, became deeply involved in the Revolutionary War. One son, Frederick, became a member of congress and was the first speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In a stirring sermon, another son, John Peter, spoke of the duty of citizens to their country, concluding that there was a time to preach and a time to fight; and now the time to fight had come. After the benediction, he threw off his clerical robe and stood before the congregation in the uniform of a colonel in the Continental Army. He later became a brigadier general and a member of Congress.

When Pastor John Peter Muhlenberg exchanged his robes for a uniform, he was in essence restating the teaching of Martin Luther that there are two kingdoms in life. One kingdom, taught Luther, is the Kingdom of the Left, which consists of God's rule in the world to maintain order and peace. He carries this out through the existing civil governments. The Kingdom of the Right refers to God's rule of mercy and grace in the church, which is carried out through Word and the Sacraments to offer forgiveness, life, and salvation to believers through Jesus Christ.

In Review

1. While it might seem desirable to have an official state church, there are many drawbacks. List some of the problems a state church might cause.

2. Thinking from the Enlightenment arrived in America in time to provide ideas for a new form of government that was to serve the people, rather than rule over them. What governmental services and benefits do you value today?

3. Luther's ideas about two kingdoms in this world are helpful. The Law helps us to see sin and the need for justice, but the Gospel proclaims that we will not find salvation in this world. How do people put their hope in this world rather than in God?

To Review and Remember

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. *Romans 13:1*