

Christianity as a force for good in the world

The Ten Commandments & Inalienable Rights

It is vital that students learn about how their world is a better place because of Christianity's influence. Thank you for helping us equip teachers and parents with this message.

The Declaration of Independence famously asserts that “all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.”

What isn't so well known is how Reformation thinkers, two hundred years before America's founding, saw the Ten Commandments as the basis for these rights.

John Witte, Jr., Professor of Law at Emory University, points out in his essay, “Calvinist Contributions to Freedom in Early Modern Europe,” that Reformers saw the Ten Commandments as more than merely laws on what not to do.¹ The commandments logically assumed certain rights from the Creator. Witte points out:

“While the First Table of the Decalogue anchored each person's religious rights...the Second Table anchored each person's natural social rights and correlative duties.”

“You shall have no other gods before Me” means that people must have the right to religious freedom so a government cannot make them violate their religious conscience and worship another god.

Reformation thinkers understood the command, “you shall not murder,” to also mean that people have the right *not* to be murdered – a right to self defense, as well as a right to care for and protect life. Reformers saw, “You shall not commit adultery,” as having the corresponding right of protection in the marriage contract. They saw, “You shall not steal,” as affirming the right to own things—property rights. This also means that, in order to buy things, people have the right to be paid for their labor.

“You shall not bear false witness” also means that everyone has the right to a good reputation and protection from slander and defamation.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not covet your neighbor's house...” means that everyone has a right to procreate, nurture and educate children (parental rights), and that their household should be respected and protected.

Johannes Althusius (pronounced *alt-housus*) was a lawyer, a Calvinist, and a leader in the new Dutch legal system developed in the late 1560s and 1570s. Witte comments that Althusius expanded on other Calvinist thinkers' ideas and more fully developed...

“the ideas that the republic is formed by a covenant between the rulers and the people before God; that the foundation of this covenant is the law of God and nature; that the Decalogue is the best expression of this higher law...that violations of these rights and liberties or of the divine and natural laws that inform and empower them, are instances of tyranny that must trigger organized constitutional resistance.”

The Pilgrims were Calvinists who carried these ideas to America which ultimately led to the Founding Fathers' thinking on ordered liberty and revolution against tyranny.

Where This Can be Taught in Public Schools

This history lesson can be taught in any class that addresses historic subjects such as the ancient Israelites, the Reformation, the Puritans, the Pilgrims, The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and America's founding. ■

1. “Calvinist Contributions to Freedom in Early Modern Europe,” Chapter eight in *Christianity and Freedom, Volume 1: Historical Perspectives*, Edited by Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke; Cambridge University Press, 2016, NY, NY