

OpenTheo

The Process of Church Disestablishment in America with Jonathan Den Hartog

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

If you love long words like antidisestablishmentarianism and are looking for a deep dive into history, then this episode is for you. Jonathan is a professor at Samford University who specializes in the founding era of American history. He joins Kevin to talk about the 50 years process by which the American states ended their church establishments. Find out how it happened, why it happened, and why it did not happen (hint: it wasn't because secularism was winning out over Christianity).

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Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States

Come, Lord Jesus: Meditations on the Second Coming of Christ

Transcript

Greetings and salutations, welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and good to have you back with us. I will introduce my guest Jonathan Den Hartog.

What a great sounding last name that is. In just a moment, first I want to thank Crossway, as always, for sponsoring the program and want to mention a new book by Dane Orland. I know many listeners out there benefited from, of course, Gentle and Lolly and other books by Dane.

This one is 150 Daily Devotions through the Psalms in the Lord. I take refuge and could be a good gift for Christmas or maybe something you want to get for yourself. But each reading is short enough to complete in five minutes and encourages believers to thoughtfully ponder and pray through 150 Psalms.

So the Psalms have often been great fodder for Daily Devotions and Dane walks us through those. So thank you to Crossway. Jonathan Den Hartog, welcome to Life and Books and Everything.

We are talking about a topic that we didn't know would be so relevant. We listeners may not know that I try to plan out really a semester of interview several months in advance. So this one has been on the calendar for two, three months now.

This is just when it lined up to do this. And I wanted to talk about a book that Jonathan edited with Carl Esbeck came out in 2019 by University of Missouri. And their Amazon sales are about to go through the roof with this thing.

I'm sure of it. But I really enjoyed the book. And I could sense over the summer, hey, this is not simply an academic discussion, but this is a live discussion all of a sudden.

And even more so now when we're recording this on Monday, November 21, the book is called Disestablishment and Religious Descent, Church State Relations in the New American States, 1776 to 1833. So we're going to talk about church establishments and disestablishment. Very exciting for people like us and hopefully a few others.

But before we do that, Jonathan, you teach at Samford, are you from Iowa? Okay. So indeed, well, yeah, give us a little bit more background on yourself. Well, so first of all, great to be here.

I discovered the podcast very early on in the pandemic. So I will say I've been a faithful listener. Since early in season one, again, come for the Midwest content and stay for the other theological pieces too.

Yes, grew up in Iowa, as you said, that that Denhart talk name, it is Dutch. We hail from

the central Iowa region. So your Pella, Iowa, where I would just put in that plug.

I do think Pella's tulip time is the best. I know that was a conversation that's come up previously. Yes, I've been in the Holland one and the Orange City one.

So yeah, you'll have to convince me of that later. Okay. So there's a conversation.

But again, we know plenty of people who from Orange City and Sioux Center, that area, but grew up in the Pella area. Really appreciated that, especially the Pella Christian High School there, went to undergrad in Michigan, did my PhD at University of Notre Dame. Fun fact, I was there at the same time as Thomas Kidd earlier this fall.

So we overlapped there. Then, Wenden was teaching in Minnesota for 13 years, University of Northwestern St. Paul, many good people up there. And then I had the opportunity just three and a half years ago to come down to Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

Not what I'd expected, but it's been a real real providential blessing to be here. And I'm excited about the school and really glad to be a part of the institution. Yeah, that's great.

We have some, we always have some folks from our church here or school who are down at Samford and people on our staff from Samford. Beautiful place. How, how, I get this question a lot.

So I ask you, how have you liked moving down to the to the south and Birmingham? I mean, it's the real south. It is definitely the real south. I think our family would say the weather is very, very different.

And as it is seeing lots of snow up north, they're appreciating the warmth. And it's definitely been good to explore new places, new restaurants, and again, good people down here. Yeah, really good.

So Jonathan, what is your, what did you do, your PhD on? What's your, your history expertise? Right. So my interest is in the revolution and new nation, which these questions really cross those, those lines. And I found myself really drawn to the questions of not only how did religion operate in the revolution, right? We talked about, well, how religious were the some of the founding fathers and what, what role did religion play in the revolution? But then to ask the question, how did that play out once you created a new nation, right? And some of the same people are, are still active, right? So you can see what they're doing in the 1780s, the 1790s, the 1800s.

And I thought that was really interesting. So wrote a dissertation that became my first book. It's called patriotism and piety, Federalist politics and religious struggle.

I haven't on my shelf. So I, so a couple of interesting things going on there, right? So

investigating the Federalist Party, who often don't get talked about as much. I think they are, they do deserve a comeback, not only because Hamilton was a Federalist.

And now we have a Hamilton musical, but because they have a lot of other interesting people, and they were wrestling with this question of religion in public life. And so that is kind of religion and politics intersection is what's been driving my scholarly investigations. So that was really useful.

I keep coming back to those themes. And then as a subsequent project, I made contact with Professor Carl Esbeck. As you mentioned, he's at the University of Missouri Law School.

The idea actually originated with him, but then we worked it out as a law professor and a historian to say, well, let's look at religious disestablishment in the States to tell each state's story on its own. So Jonathan, this book, am I right? There was a book similar to this that talked about the ratification of the Constitution in the various States, but there had never been, it's surprising to me, it seems like such a simple, necessary concept, but there never been a book quite like this before. That's right.

There have been books that have looked at American religious liberty in general, and usually they give maybe a chapter to the whole disestablishment process. Because of course, what really matters is how religion is operating at the state level, right? Once you have the First Amendment, there's never any question about any type of national establishment. But even at that point, there were many States that did have official state churches.

Yeah, so let's jump into the book. It's a big book. It's over 400 pages, but you really nicely in the introduction, I appreciate it.

You front load all of the good conclusions. So if somebody doesn't make it all the way through, you give a number of findings and summarize things well, and then they can go through the individual states. So we don't have time to go through all the States, but I do just want to walk through some of this.

And we'll start in the introduction then. So give us a definition. What are we talking about? What is establishment as we talk about churches and what is disestablishment other than the best scrabble word score, anti-disestablishmentarianism, the longest word in the English language, we're told.

What do these terms mean? This would be a situation where actually using anti-disestablishmentarianism would be exactly appropriate. So I mean, for an establishment, it is giving, it is making one official, usually denomination, the official church for the entire, in this case, colony then state. So it's more than just, oh, you get a certificate, you are approved.

There are a lot of elements to what might go into being the official church. And I'd underline this is not just, in most cases, it's not all Christian churches are welcome, but this is the Anglican church is the official church, or in New England, the congregational church is the official church. So an official church, the first step that most people think about is funding, right? It goes to money.

So this specific church would receive their financial support from the state. Now, of course, how are you going to get that money from the state? Well, the people, the citizens are going to be taxed to support that church. So the financial support is usually the biggest one and might raise them the most questions, right, when people's pocketbooks are involved.

But then there are others. It might go to licensure, right? Who counts as an official minister, right? You would have to get a license to preach. It might have to go to mandating a tenants out worship.

Definitely happens that way in the 1600s, less so in the 1700s, but mandating worship or where you could meet to worship that everyone would have to get approved. These official churches would support public functions, whether that would be caring for the poor, right? You might think public assistance or welfare to go through those churches, but they might be the keepers of public records, right? This event, a birth, a marriage, a funeral doesn't count unless it's registered with the official church. And along with that, in some colonies, in some states, marriages, for instance, were only counted as official, if performed in an official church.

And then often, the other side of this would be for religious office holders, they would have to give an oath that they supported usually that official church. Maybe it was a Christian oath in general, but often it was specifically in line with, say, the 39 articles. Yeah, that's a great summary.

And I know you do that in the introduction, just what established it means. It's financial. Sometimes it means that tests for creeds and confessions over the church and can be setting aside.

Sunday often was, in fact, we'll talk about long into the history of America. That was one of the last things to go away. Even when establishments did, it was still, well, obviously we should have some Sabbath laws.

People still concluded. So it, as it, as you historical question, because you raise a really good point, establishment is of a denomination. It's a Presbyterian or an Anglican or a congregational or in Europe, a Catholic.

Has there ever been a Christian generic establishment or a pan-Protestant generic establishment? This is an interesting question. There were a few attempts in the

revolutionary period, and I think the best documented in our chapter came from South Carolina, where in its first decade of independence, so in the 1780s, South Carolina provided that. But then in the 1790s, they actually moved away and moved to this establishment as well.

So it didn't, it didn't last very long. The other place that's really interesting is in Virginia, where they were moving, or the proposal was on the table for that plural establishment. And here this was Patrick Henry said, "Maybe the way to ensure religious peace in Virginia is to support all the Christian churches equally." And that was the bill that was being debated, but it was eventually voted down because of a lot of debates that maybe we can talk about, that James Madison actually opposed, that then moved to complete disestablishment in Virginia.

So there weren't very many, and that's one of those moments that maybe a lost opportunity that makes me think that would have been a really interesting experiment to see other states try a plural establishment. It would have had some of the same problems, but it also would have, I think, resolved some of the issues being felt in the 1780s and 1790s. And that race was a really important point because it's easy for us in the 21st century to think that the process of disestablishment in the states was a sign of religious or Christian weakness because we think of, ah, they must have been moved.

Everything was sort of moving. This was a process of secularization, and people could make that argument, but it wasn't because the Christian denominations or Christianity was weak in America. It was a sign of its strength and its vigor, namely, that the Presbyterians and the Baptists weren't really happy in Virginia that the Anglicans had the established religion.

And this is what you find too in Europe. The, the, now 17th century, early 18th century Europe isn't at all what, you know, it's not nearly as far as the American colonies are going to go, but they're with Puffendorf, with Locke. They're starting to talk about a lot about toleration.

And that impetus is coming from Protestant nations. The first ones to say, hey, we need to really look at how we're doing this establishment thing come from Protestants who are 1685, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. They're, they're nervous about what's happening in the Catholic world.

And so just say a little bit more about that, and you can talk about Europe, or you can talk about, you know, our specialty here in the United States, that disestablishment was not because Christianity was waning. It was because so many Christians were insistent on their understanding of Christianity, and they needed some way to get along with one another. I think, I think that's, that's really apt.

So the, again, for our listeners, the, the process of disestablishment is then this process

by which, uh, governmentally, there's an unwinding of an official church and moving to a position of, uh, equal treatment for multiple denominations, or religious liberty for all, all churches. And I think we really should underline this point, that the process of disestablishment did not, uh, come up, should not be read as a move of secularization, that it was, it was not simply the enlightenment, as some people would, would say, right, we need to nuance that a lot. There is, uh, some elements of enlightened thought that would support this.

You mentioned Locke's letter on toleration. It'd be very useful that ends up supporting these moves, but what we found, again, so this is not just an assertion, but this is what the data bears out, is that in fact in the, in the states, in the United States, it was the churches. It was the other dissenting Protestant groups who said this is a better arrangement that we, we would just prefer equal treatment, not, not funding, but equal treatment of, of all the churches.

And so they're bringing a Protestant principle to bear on this. And I think this is present, uh, in, again, in individual states, and we could tell individual state stories, uh, that's definitely true in Virginia. Virginia is an interesting story we could unpack, but also at the national level, as, as the first amendment is being debated, that all of this arises from a Protestant principle.

The language that they used primarily was the right of private judgment that is going to limit, uh, what the state can do. And we would say the right of conscience would say it's better for the state not to interfere with these religious matters. Yeah, I want to jump back to in a moment to some of the, the big picture findings, but you, you've mentioned Virginia a couple of times.

So let's, let's go there. We won't have time to do all the states, but Virginia, the most important state, Massachusetts would differ, but the, the largest, the leading state. And, uh, this is one of Carl's chapters, Carl Esbeck in here, and he does a nice job of summarizing, and you can say more about this, but you have James Madison, his famous memorial, but it's not just Madison.

It's the Presbyterians and the Baptists in Virginia, as well as Madison who are making arguments in their petitions for some form of disestablishment. And, uh, in this chapter that they're broken down, summarize historical arguments in the petition. And he lists about eight of those basically saying, this hasn't worked.

Uh, and then to your point, religious arguments and in the chapter, they're summarized 10 of these. So these are arguments from Mark 12, 17, render unto Caesar, the things that are Caesar's talks about the con, the conscience, the, the limits that government should have. Christianity does not need the support of civil government.

Christ said his kingdom is not of this world. Now Christians can and did disagree with

these, but it is really worth seeing they were making Christian arguments. They, they were arguing from verses and Christian principles and some disagreed, but, but they were trying to make religious arguments for disestablishment.

And then there's, he lists six different governmental or prudential arguments. So talk a little bit more about how this went down in Virginia and how important it was. I know Virginia, some, the older model is Virginia was the model for everyone else.

And, and here you argue, that's not quite the case, but it certainly was, was very important. And how did the argument play out among those different groups? Right. We, we do want to be careful there because, yeah, although Virginia, Virginia's experience did have some influence.

It didn't have the definitive influence that often is treated. And, and so we were actually trying to make that point because Supreme Court cases, both there's a case called Reynolds in the 19th century. There's a case called Everson in the 20th century.

Both of these basically said, well, if you look to Virginia, you understand all the theory of what's going on. And we said, we want to say, wait, wait, wait, let's look at all of the states to understand what's, what is going on. And, and to say, each has its own bearing or ability to comment on the disestablishment project.

It's not just Virginia. So that's, that I'm going to start with that caveat. But I still think Virginia is an interesting story.

And because it does produce some great writing on all sides, it's worth talking about. So that's why the, that is a significant chapter in the book. So in the 1780s, as Virginia's coming out of the revolution, they do have to wrestle with what's the place of our official Anglican church, right, which had been very strong in the colonial period.

But also, let's point out, strong enough that it oppressed, right, Presbyterians and Baptists. So when we say not just strong, there was support, but there was also the real hand of the state that would lock Baptist clergy up. And so this would, this, this makes them not very happy.

Maybe in the post revolutionary setting, there's a way to relieve these, these pressures, right, to, to give. And I think you're exactly right. Presbyterians, full standing as well, right, this would be a real interest there.

As I mentioned, so Patrick Henry in the legislature puts this idea on the table. Let's move from a, from a Anglican establishment to a plural establishment. Let's give all the churches opportunities to receive tax funding and official status.

And it almost passes. And so this is, this is that moment where it's like, oh, that would have been interesting to see what would have happened. James Madison, who's also in

the legislature at this point thinks this is a bad idea.

And let's remember Madison, who had studied at Princeton with John Witherspoon and now is trying to apply some of those insights in Virginia. He thinks this is a bad idea. And so he starts a, first of all, a delaying campaign.

And then he begins to organize these petition drives, like, and what you see is multiple groups sending petitions to the Virginia legislature saying, no, thank you. We'd prefer just full religious liberty. And Madison's Memorial in Remonstrance is the most famous.

It's, I think everyone should read that. But in fact, religious groups, Presbyterians actually signed, signed petitions with larger numbers than Madison's. So this is really worth paying attention to.

Oh, it's religious reasoning that gets involved as to why an establishment is not such a good idea in Virginia. So there's a delay. It's delayed for another legislative session.

In the process, James Madison actually campaigns on behalf of Patrick Henry to make him governor so he can no longer advance his bill. And then when they come back, it's Madison with a text written by Thomas Jefferson to, as they say, establish religious freedom in Virginia. So then you move to this disestablishment stance in Virginia.

And so again, historians have looked at this and said, oh, you see, it's all about Jefferson and Madison. It's all these people who have been to college who have imbibed the enlightenment who want disestablishment. And the better history is to say they are working very closely with, again, Presbyterian elders and Baptist leaders like John Leeland to make sure this happens.

So when Jefferson writes his famous phrase, the wall of separation between church and state, not in the Constitution, but in that letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. And we can argue that that's maybe not the best interpretation of the Constitution, but it's very influential. Jefferson says it, when the Baptist heard that, were they excited about Jefferson making that claim? Right.

And so just to give people a chronology, the letter to the Danbury Baptist is 1801 when Jefferson is president, right? It's he's he's reflecting back 15 years after the debate over religious freedom in Virginia. So for the most part, we're we think the Baptist and Connecticut, we're not happy to hear that because they don't record the letter in their official minutes. So so they appreciate his support for the disestablishment project in Connecticut, which is what he's trying to advance.

But they're not endorsing that full interpretation, right? That whole wall metaphor that Jefferson uses, interesting note, Roger Williams had talked about a wall to protect the church. But it seems like most people in the early Republic, the new nations saw more so as only a one way wall, right? That it should protect the church from governmental

interference, but not at all keep Christians and even church bodies from commenting on politics. So whereas I think Jefferson wants to sideline religious involvement, the church is almost universally would disagree with that.

Yeah, because the Baptist, by and large, were supportive of Jefferson, and that may seem strange from our advantage. Jefferson, you know, his Jefferson Bible, but but the Baptist appreciated that he was not for establishment. And for Baptist, you know, even more southern Presbyterians, they were the ones who were, I say this with all love and respect to my Baptist friends, they were always sort of at the bottom of the ecclesiastical ladder.

I mean, if somebody was going to be oppressed, it was going to be the Baptist, you know, in other centuries others, but for our purposes, it was the Baptist. So they were they were pleased with that. But to your point, the wall metaphor seemed to suggest, yeah, we're glad for the tyranny of government to not tell us what to do.

But this doesn't at all mean, no, in fact, hardly anybody thinks that Christianity should not have a privileged place in the American Republic. And this is where the record of history is, it's very difficult to make it just one thing or another in terms of contemporary debates, because we can look with these very stark polarities that the only way to really have, you know, Christian, and if either you have an established Christian state or Christian nationalism, or you have some very official, magistrate, enacting these things on behalf of your denomination, or well, you just have to, you know, celebrate drag queen, queen story hour, and there's really nothing in but, but I think the story of especially the early American Republic is, okay, this disestablishment is happening. And we've never had an establishment at the federal level, and the First Amendment makes it plain that that won't happen.

And yet even as disestablishment happens over 50 years, Protestant Christianity is still extremely, what should we say, privileged. There are still often tests, you know, oaths of office, there's still you have to prove that you're Protestant, and that gets less and less, and it becomes more, you have to prove that you're, you're at least, you know, believe in God and believe in providence, and because atheists, you couldn't trust them to care about morality. And there's Sunday laws.

So it wouldn't at all be true. Correct me if I'm wrong, wouldn't it all be true to say that over these 50 years, Christian influence is just waning across the board. They continue to assume even as there's no established church in each of these states that well, but we are kind of a Protestant people.

Do you think that's accurate? Yeah, there's a lot of good points there. And feel free to push back on what's overstate. I know Maryland would say, hey, we got Catholics here.

Right. That's a different, that's a related question because often the religious freedom

and toleration, it was just kind of assumed, well, but maybe not really for Catholics because they're in the legions to a foreign power, and we can't really trust them. Although just just on that point, through the revolution into the early republic, the small number of Catholics do demonstrate their patriotism.

And so there's not a lot of sense of tension there. So for the most part, a lot of good points, let's try to unpack them. One of them would be, yes, there is growing Christian influence.

Although I would just underline the reason they needed a greater movement, a second grade awakening, is because there were challenges. Right. The 1790s, especially did see an influx of European religious skepticism, people, churches were disrupted following the revolution.

So there was a need for renewal of the churches. And that renewal movement really takes off late 1790s into the 1800s, and then flowing into the next several decades. And the way, again, on one hand, the way you do this was more, again, through the churches and culturally, not with the arm of the state.

And I think that's the disestablishment model. And what we see is the churches could get together on this theme or this approach. And so this is also the era of great interdenominational cooperation.

People coming together, American Bible Society, American Sunday School Union, American Tract Society to spread the gospel in a lot of different ways, and recognizing that sharing the energy was better than each trying to do it for their own denomination. So cooperation through voluntary societies helps to spread that influence. At the same time, they want to speak to their is appreciation when the politics recognize that those Christian commitments.

And there could be morals legislation that the churches support. And here, let's point out that that those disestablished groups, like Baptists, were quite happy to support that type of legislation. Right? And as long as there was kind of shared recognition of standing for all the denominations, they actually found quite a lot that they could agree on in public life.

One of the features that may be surprising to folks is that in some states, there were actually written in the Constitution or proposed legislation initially that would disallow clergy from serving in state office. So we think of the religious test going the other way, but this has some precedence in England with the House of Lords or House of Commons or both. You can correct me.

But I know this is in the chapter on North Carolina, and I know it from my Witherspoon studies because there was that proposal in Georgia, and Witherspoon wrote a really

delightful piece arguing against this provision that would disbar clergy from serving in state assemblies and serving in the legislature. And Witherspoon basically says, "Okay, so if I preach the gospel and I believe the Scriptures and I'm a member of the clergy, I can't be in the legislature. But if I were to become a dissolute drunk and I would be defrocked in no longer a minister, then you're saying that's exactly the sort of person who ought to serve in the Assembly in Georgia.

I understand your point. He was adept at the good sarcasm. So where did this come from? How many states considered this, and did it get in the books, and when did it get removed?" Right.

So Witherspoon is a great example of this, right? If he had been disbarred from going to the Continental Congress, he wanted to have been there to participate in those debates. So clearly, we have national examples of ministers involved for the most part that doesn't get in place, although, again, Virginia is an interesting case, right? Where Virginia goes so far as to not only disestablish the Anglican Church, but to set up a lot of hardship requirements that limit what the churches can do in Virginia. So we would say that's overshooting the mark, where they are limiting the way churches can incorporate, for instance, and also putting these ministerial limitations on service.

And some of those stay in place even into the 20th century, not many, but there are a couple places of that. This whole disestablishment project, do you think this is, again, for better or worse, is this an example of American exceptionalism? I think you say at the beginning, this was not tried, and to a large degree, at least officially, has not been tried in Europe. Is this really unique in America? And if so, how did it, and why did it happen here? Right.

Well, we would argue that it is a little bit unprecedented, which means we should study it. That this is a new contribution that the Americans are making, that the experience that I think grows out of Protestant pluralism, right? Forces people to say, how can we work and live together within a polity and still keep our faithful commitments. So that's what they're raising.

And again, it's done in a friendly way. So you could say, well, it's different than what France does, which is a secular move, right? The laicism of the French Revolution. We're not trying to do that.

We, the United States, are not trying to do that. And of course, to this day, England or Norway or Sweden would have official churches. So they also have not followed the US in that.

So I think the US does have an interesting story to tell. One that I would say is, again, not, so it is change. It is maybe even a little revolutionary, but it's not a break.

It's not so unprecedented because of that, because of those roots that it has in Protestant commitments, right? Those defined Protestant commitments that are driving this, not simply secularism. That's really good. In the introduction where you have these findings, let me just read, let me just highlight a few of them and you can talk about any or all of them.

I want to all of them. Here's finding number one. Neither the US Constitution nor the First Amendment contributed to the disestablishment process in the original 13 states.

So that's a big claim. You're saying this wasn't driven by the First Amendment. Let me give you another one.

Finding two, you say, protecting the right of private judgment, that came easily. However, ending the funding, well, that was more difficult. Maybe the people didn't want to be taxed, but that was harder to see that really we got to do this all on our own financial back.

Finding four, a majority of the colonists who agitated for disestablishment were religious dissenters. We've talked about that. You have 10 of them.

Let me talk about Thomas Jefferson. So you say in nine, religious tests initially were narrow preferences in Native the state church. In the first reforms, they were then brought in to embrace more and more Protestants and later all Christians.

Then things evolved further and the religious tests were repealed or their underlying purposes moved away. Talk about any or all of those findings. You have 10 of them at the front.

Those are just some that stuck out to me. The biggest piece that we found and that I'd want to underline again is in all of these states, it comes from Protestant impulses. We've talked about that, but I think that is our biggest takeaway.

One other distinction that we might make, of course, is the 50-year process, right? That long unwinding. We talked about Virginia, Virginia's in the 1780s. I always love to point out to people that the New England states, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, don't disestablish until the early 19th century, 1818, 1819.

Then Massachusetts is the very last one in 1833. Very clearly, the presence of the First Amendment by itself did not eradicate the possibility of a state church. I think that's interesting.

Of course, Massachusetts happens because the Unitarians have taken over the Massachusetts establishment. Then it was the Orthodox Trinitarian believers who said, "Well, hey, maybe it would be better not to be paying for those churches and just to support our own." They come around to that conclusion too. It's a long process, and it is

felt strongly because of, again, multiple Protestant groups all being in the same space.

It's easy to set up an establishment when there's one church body, whether that's Anglican or congregational, but it's much harder when all of a sudden you're in a colony now a state that has Lutheran and Presbyterians and Congregationalists and Anglicans all mixed together. Reality of pluralism then allows for them to think creatively in a way that maintains peace. Then I think we underlined, and I think this was established, especially our finding number eight, which was kind of beware of those follow-up limitations on the churches, that we really are defining that disestablishment process as moving towards liberty for all the churches and neutrality to the denominations, but not a neutrality between Christianity and secularism.

So you helpfully walk through after those findings and the introduction, you go more or less chronologically, how did this happen? Massachusetts is the last chapter. I want to come back to that. The first chapter, which I was very interested in, is New Jersey, which never had an establishment, and when Witherspoon and others, many very reputable, well-known Presbyterian leaders were a part of the Provincial Congress that drew up the Constitution of New Jersey.

They did not draw up an establishment, so they didn't have to establish, but they never drew one up, and that's important because Witherspoon, the only clergymen to sign the Declaration of Independence, and he comes from Scotland where they have a Presbyterian establishment, and you might think if anyone would be strongly agitating for an establishment, it would be somebody like Witherspoon, and I'm not sure how he came out of establishmentarianism. My hunch, having read everything he's written that's available, is that he was happy to live with it in Scotland, and that's just the waters they swam in and probably wouldn't have voted to get rid of it in Scotland, and yet he always had a good, I would say, evangelical, kind of ecumenical impulse that when he landed in New Jersey and there were many other denominations there, I don't think he felt it necessary to advocate for establishment, so I think he probably had more of a prudential judgment around it that, yep, if you got it and you can do it, I don't think it's prohibited, but neither do we think that it's required would be how I would summarize his thinking, and my question for you, Jonathan, is how many people were changing their mind on this, and how many were just coming to the realization, you know, how many would have said absolutely, I think it's wrong to have an establishment, and how many were saying, you know what, I just don't think it works here, and I don't think that we can do it effectively, and therefore we need to find a better way. That's a really good question.

Can I ask one question about witherspoon? Could part of that also be the battles that he fought within the Scottish establishment, and the issues that he saw in Scotland, and some of those disputes that were dogging him before he came to America, do you think that might have been part of his read-on things? That's a really good point. He was more often than not on the losing side of the debates between the evangelicals and the

moderate party in Scotland, and that's often just in this whole discussion gets, I think, under-considered. Even if, even if, say, we could agree, we're setting up the Presbyterian colony on Mars, well, but I really want my kind of Presbyterian.

I mean, I want the good Presbyterians from my vantage point, so even if you say, now they don't have liberalism in the same way that we have today, I mean, theological liberalism, but when we come back to Massachusetts, there you have, well, okay, Congregationalists. Yay, well, Unitarian Congregationalists, Trinitarian Congregationalists. So yes, I think witherspoon, certainly, he already had a kind of pan-protestant sympathy, and when he came to New Jersey, and just the history of Presbyterianism in this country, already in 1729 with the adopting act, it was already established that Presbyterian ministers that the articles in the confession and the larger catechism relative to the civil magistrate were not to be taken as binding on the ministers.

Now, it wasn't full-blown religious freedom, but it wasn't understanding. I mean, that's early, already 1729. So witherspoon comes to a place where already the Presbyterians are saying, yeah, we're not really on board with the way our European forefathers were thinking about the magistrate.

That sounds good. And I was going to point this to be really interesting, maybe slightly new to conversation about Presbyterian history, but that I feel like the Presbyterians are the ones who could have been swayed either way, where they could have endorsed some establishments. In fact, that was the worry at the national level was that, oh, this is going to be a Presbyterian establishment, even as they're saying, no, we're not interested in that.

But in different states, again, Virginia, if they had supported a multiple establishment, then maybe it would have gone forward. Whereas most Baptists are almost entirely opposed to an official recognition, just because they've been so persecuted. So I do think it is much more of that prudential judgment in most places.

Now, I wanted to tell one fascinating story, at least to me, and that happens in Connecticut, right? Where a lot of again, Federalists saw the church establishment as a public recognition of Christianity as a bulwark against unbelief. And so my story comes from Lyman Beecher, a very famous minister. And he records this even in his autobiography, where he says, the day that Connecticut disestablished the church, it was the darkest day of his life, because he'd grown up in it.

And he says, he came home and he slouches in the corner of his kitchen, and he says, I'm weeping for the church. The church in Connecticut is over. But then after he got over that, he reports years later, no, it wasn't the worst thing that happened to the church in Connecticut.

It was the best thing that happened to the church of Connecticut, because he said it did two things. It made them trust God more, and it made them be more energetic in pursuing ministry. So he was able to look back from a vantage point of 10, 20 years on and say, well, we were really concerned, but in the end, it served the church better.

So I think that's a great story to recognize that people really came to embrace that disestablished stance. Yeah, that's a great anecdote. It leads me to this.

This is in Louisiana, Missouri chapter. Now, this is about Catholicism, but it perhaps applies. It author writes, the Catholic turnaround lends credence to to Tocqueville's argument less than two decades later, that separating church and state in America benefited Catholicism by freeing priests from political concerns, thereby allowing them to focus on promoting Catholic beliefs.

And it seems to me, you could probably say the same thing about Protestant denominations. Now, again, where we are, we look and we say our Christian beliefs are being ushered out of the public square. And that would have been none of the founders, even Jefferson.

No one would have wanted that or envisioned that. It was assumed that you needed virtue and virtue came from faith, and the faith that's of it's Christianity of some kind or another. So we're from this vantage point saying, no, we're trying to find how do we get our arguments back in the public square? And we should.

And yet, I think the point you're making and the Tocqueville makes is, you know, one of the blessings was it kind of got you out of the business of having to run the civil affairs of your state and allowed you then to focus on, because inevitably, the church, if it's established, even if you say, well, the church has the spiritual mission, well, but you're the established church. You're connected to the magistrate and it's connected to you inevitably, that church then takes on sort of the caretaker of the politics and the culture. And almost de facto is going to drift away from its theological spiritual concerns.

Did you see others making that sort of connection, just like the antidote you gave with Lyman Beecher? Right, so we have that that quote from Tocqueville and there's Tocqueville's referenced several points in the volume. People found that our studies of disestablishment are laying the groundwork for Tocqueville's analysis, right, where he says it's liberating because it's such a different experience then, again, his experience in France, where the Catholic church was so wrapped up in French politics. And here he says, the minister here in America, Tocqueville says, ministers gain more authority because they have a moral stance, but they're not engaged in the day-to-day politics.

So at least in the 19th century, Tocqueville found that a much better, better approach. We're coming to the end here, but I want to go back to Massachusetts because that's the one that takes the longest. This is maybe not directly a question about disestablishment,

but I wonder, Jonathan, I've often asked this myself, other people have asked me it, and you probably have some more specifics you can give.

How did Massachusetts, I mean, it's Salem witch trials and that's, you know, had its own historiography and often misunderstood, but not a shining moment for the Puritans, no doubt. But you have the city on a hill and you have this godly commonwealth and you think of the Puritans there, and by the, from 16 talking, by the time you get to the revolutionary period, it is dominated by Unitarian. How did Massachusetts swing to the Unitarians? And then a related question, today we think of Massachusetts as, you know, maybe with California, the most liberal state.

I mean, I don't think any, sometimes they elect a, you know, a Republican governor who manages to, but usually it's deep blue. We don't think, you know, Massachusetts would be considered some of the hardest ground to plow for church planters in this country. Is it, is that because Massachusetts became something different or would someone make the argument that Massachusetts has retained its very morally puritanical ethos, but it's now adopted a different morality for that Puritan strain.

Give me your take on Massachusetts and how we went from Puritans to Unitarians to maybe the most, the most difficult ground for the gospel in the country. Right. Well, first of all, I should, I should be very careful and I should say, I love the state of Massachusetts.

So I don't want our listeners in New England. I love Massachusetts there. I met my wife there.

I studied there. Too much hate mail. Yes.

Love Massachusetts. Again, a fascinating long-term story. So appreciate, and in fact, one of my graduate school interests was, was Puritanism.

So I love, love digging into, their writings that are, again, not only pious, but deeply analytical on so much of life. I would actually suggest that this switch happens after the revolution. Okay.

So that, that you still have most, most acknowledgement is most public talk up to 1776 is, is orthodox, so John Adams is an exception. John Adams is an exception. He, he, he is a unique individual all the way through even, even religiously.

So, so, you know, through Harvard, there is some of the, you know, these discussions. It's not out in the general public. I would say higher education matters a great deal, right? That people mark the, the switch over, not to any given individual, but when the board of Harvard decides to appoint Unitarians, right? And, and that's not until the first decade of the 19th century.

Okay. So maybe one point I would just emphasize is, institutions of education matter quite a bit for public leadership, for cultural leadership. And then, yeah, who, who, who guides lovers of influence.

So in other words, political structures do matter. So we should, we should be aware of that. As to what happens later, again, I feel less comfortable speaking broadly, but I do think that the shifting immigration of the later 19th century really does transform the population base of the state.

And so my observation would just be you have multiple levels of cultures present in Massachusetts. They, they, you do have old school Yankees. You have very people who trace very closely back to some of these 19th century trends, maybe Unitarian Harvard, but you also have various other ethnic groups who have really enriched the state.

And yes, there are definitely some points that that might be a more secular Puritanism, but there's, there's also people who are not concerned about that at all and just trying to live their lives. And you also are seeing the high tech sectors in Massachusetts. So no, it would just be great to see a renewal into cheer on people at Gordon and Gordon Conwell and the churches of Massachusetts, for instance, Park Street Church, like let's just celebrate what the Park Street's presence there on, on Boston Common faithful there for over 200 years, although we can say it did get its start in the second grade awakening, responding to Unitarianism.

So it is actually rooted in this very moment. Let me ask a last question. And I hope that I'll come visit Samford.

Sometime you come visit Charlotte. I'd love to just continue. And I want to ask the last question about history in general and how we do history, because here's what you say on page six.

The editors firmly instructed authors not to express their thoughts, if any, on history's application to issues that concern church state relations in the 20th and 21st centuries. I could hear some people saying, and you know, this is a very live debate among evangelical historians at the moment, what sort of history should we be doing? I could hear some people say, well, wait a minute, we have all these really important issues, and we need to be advocates for justice and righteousness. And so of course, we do history with contemporary application in mind.

And I would say, that's yeah, we do study history to learn things and illuminate the present. And yet I find myself really agreeing with that sentence that I just read, in order to really the first stage, in order to do history the best way we can, we need to say, let's try to understand them on their own terms. And let's not go digging first of all to say, aha, there's something that's going to help me make my point.

So why did you emphasize that with all of your authors and anything you want to say about the state of the historian's guild relative to these issues today? Well, you exactly pick up on that. That was a decided strategy that we had, that we wanted to get the past correct, that we believe it did have an integrity that we wanted to understand. And then any conclusions that people draw, they're welcome to do that.

And I could imagine people drawing different conclusions, and that's fine. But we wanted to document and be very careful with what was going on. And so I think this does go to contemporary debates.

Even this past several months, there's been a lot of debate over how do we deal with presentism has been the label or the hook that people have talked about. And this is something that historians need to be really, I think, conscientious about. And I talk about, I think about it in terms of a tightrope, because does history have ties to the present? Of course it does.

We wouldn't be having this conversation if it didn't, that there are these themes that connect. And when I'm teaching, I want students to see those connections. So there are definitely contemporary things to think about in the past.

On the other hand, we need to maintain the integrity of the past as we study it, that it has a reality of its own, that we shouldn't deform by simply bringing our own biases, our own questions to it. We should let its strangeness and its difference instruct us as well. So you can you can fall off by being too presentist or too antiquarian.

And I'm saying that the good historian needs to be grounded in the past and then only tentatively make those connections and allow others to make those connections as well. I often think of the the Quentin Skinner phrase seeing things their way when you do intellectual history in cultural history, you want to first of all say, would the way I'm presenting this make sense to the people I'm talking about? They may disagree with your implications. And inevitably they may say you didn't get this right.

But that's true and should be especially true for the Christian historian. Whether we're speaking about somebody in the 1780s or the 1980s, we ought to be trying to express what they did, why they did it, the things they said in ways that would make sense to themselves. And then if there's further connections to say, and here's our critique on what they did, that's certainly permissible.

But only when we first done that hard work. And that's why I really appreciate what you've done in this book. I'm a bad host in that I was also supposed to mention halfway through the episode, but I'll mention it at the very end, another book from another sponsor, Desiring God.

It's a new book coming out by John Piper. I hope to have John on to talk about this book

in the New Year, Meditations on the Second Coming of Christ, Careful Exegesis, Devotional Encouraging, Edifying Will Be Available in January. You can pre-order WTS books and elsewhere.

So I hope to have John on to talk about that because many Christians, it doesn't loom large in how they think about the world. So I want to mention that book coming up and thank Desiring God for sponsoring. But Jonathan, thank you for being with us.

Again, let me mention the book. If anyone is watching on YouTube, they can see this track. Look at all my notes here.

Disestablishment and Religious Descent, Church State Relations in the New American States, 1776, 1833. Bless you as you finish up before the Thanksgiving holiday. I hope we can be in the same place at the same time.

If you ain't Dutch, well, we still love you. And thanks for being on the program and for joining us today. Thanks so much.

And yes, the invitations open the next time you find yourself in Birmingham. Yeah, that's great. All right.

Until next time to our listeners, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.

[buzzing]