We begin today the seventh in the series of lessons on American religious history. Let me begin by a very brief review and some indication of where we would like to go in this lesson. I hope obviously that you are one, carefully reading the book. It is just imperative that you work your way through the book as we work our way through the outlines that have been provided for you. It is really impossible to say what needs to be said in such a very brief frame of time. So I am counting upon the major text to be a supplement to our lectures, to fill them out, to add additional information and insight on your part.

Secondly, you should be consulting as we go along in consecutive fashion the pictures of transparencies. They are coded in your outline. They are given to you, and since we are very limited in our use of visual aids, this will help you to see what I am trying to say. It seems to me that we learn when we think conceptually. And if our ideas are few and they are simply put and illustrated and endlessly repeated, there is a tendency to remember them. And that’s the fundamental thesis of my theory of teaching.

We come today to two subjects. One is the history of the rise of Methodism. And second, we would like to broach, but certainly not complete in this lesson, the issue of religion and the American Revolution, certainly a topic that is much discussed in our day. When we studied the rise of the major denominations in the first and second lesson plans, we put emphasis upon what we would call today the historic mainline denominations. We studied, for instance, the rise of Congregationalism through Pilgrims and Puritans. We studied the rise of Presbyterianism. And I argued that the origin of Presbyterianism is through a settlement of Scots-Irish, the settlement of English Puritans of Presbyterian ecclesiology, and the coming of continental reformed groups such as Huguenots and German Palatinates.
When we studied the rise of Baptists, I argued that the origin of Baptists are two: regular Baptists (that is Baptists who came into this country with settled convictions) and second, separate Baptists (those who were previously Congregationalists). But in the context of the first of the Great Awakenings, they became “New Lighters,” New Light Congregationalists, or separate Congregationalists, and then eventually became Baptists. The Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the Baptists are three of the major influential denominations in the story of American religion.

We come today to the fourth. The reason that we did not place American Methodism with the story of the Baptists or the Congregationalists or the Presbyterians is simply because they came late into the British colonial experience. They came just before what is called the American War of Revolution. Let me begin by saying a few things about the founder of Methodism, and that obviously is John Benjamin Wesley, II.

John Wesley is certainly heralded as one of the great figures of the eighteenth century of English history. He emerged from a very large family of children, was trained at Oxford University at Christ Church as was his father, Samuel Wesley, and his grandfather before him. When he finished his work at Christ Church College, he became a tutor at Lincoln College in Oxford. In that context and shortly after a brief period of helping his Anglican father at Epworth where his parents lived, John Wesley was part of what is called The Holy Club.

In that context, men such as his brother Charles and George Whitefield met to read devotional literature and divinity and do works of charity. It is out of that holy club or holy fraternity that some say that Methodism finds its origin. This group of zealous though perhaps not converted young men met for prayer, as I have said. And they were called a variety of things. They were called Bible moths, sacramentarians, and even Methodists because they had a methodical interest in the Holy Scriptures.

John Wesley later came to British North America to the colony of Georgia. There he, as an Anglican priest, labored among British settlers. But he ended his short time there in discouragement. Back in England, he was influenced by Moravians. And that wonderful event that he records in his journal of his conversion occurred on May 24th, 1738, he says, at a quarter of nine in the evening. He went to a small gathering of Moravian people at Aldersgate
Street where he heard a man reading from Luther’s preface to his commentary to the Romans.

And John Wesley says that he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” He felt that Christ died for his sins, even his, and saved him from the law of sin and death. And that marks a real turning point in John Wesley’s life. From 1738 or early 1739 until the end of his years in 1791, John Wesley labored as an Anglican priest to bring restoration and revival to the Anglican Church. He was not a schismatic though often accused of that. What he wanted to really do was to revive the great Anglican Church, to place the gospel at its central point within that church.

Wesley was very prolific. In fact one writer says that by the end of his life, he left nothing behind but a well-worn clergyman’s gown, a huge library of books, a much-abused reputation, and the Methodist Church. Now in all honesty, John Wesley founded “societies” not churches. And he hoped that these informal societies would have an impact upon the church that he loved so deeply. After his death in England, his followers in 1795 broke from Anglicanism officially to become Methodists.

Now the story before us is the story of the advent of Methodism into the American British colonies. The story goes something like this. The origin of Methodists is somewhat unlike the Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Congregationalists basically because Methodists as a group of people did not migrate or immigrate into the British colonies. A few came and then later John Wesley sent professional itinerants here to do the labor of evangelism and traveling in itinerancy. So what I would say is this; Methodism unlike the other denominations, is unique in that the great Methodist Church, which was the last of the major denominations to come to America and yet flowered to numerical superiority over the others, was one that was brought here not so much on the wing of the coming settler, but by the work of evangelism and church planting.

So the origin of Methodism in British North America is two-fold. First is the coming of what I would call lay preachers, men who did not have formal training in John Wesley’s circuit riding school, but men who were laity, who on the side attempted to preach and to carry the Methodist gospel. When John Wesley observed how fruitful these men were, he determined that he would send appointees into British North America.
Some of these early Methodists, these laymen, were men like Robert Strawbridge who arrived from Ireland in 1760 and settled at Sandy Creek, Maryland. He held meetings in his home, itinerating widely into Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia. Another man of prominence among these early Methodists was Philip Embury. And let me say this; Methodists have kept for us the most detailed records of church life of any of the major denominations. Methodists’ archives are a rich pool of information about the life of the church far superior, it would seem to me at least on the frontier, to the records of the other denominations.

Philip Embury arrived from Ireland, as Robert Strawbridge had in 1760, and settled in New York. He preached from his home, starting works in and around New York City. Thomas Webb, a third early Methodist layman, arrived from England. He was a soldier under General Braddock in 1775, was converted under the Moravians, but returned to the area of Albany, New York, and then in Philadelphia.

So what I am saying is; these unofficial lay Methodist people began to have fairly productive ministries: Strawbridge in Maryland, Embury in New York, and Thomas Webb in Philadelphia. And John Wesley simply said that if these men are that productive, what could be done if I sent over seasoned circuit riders, men with ten or more years of experience on the itinerancy circuits of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland?

So beginning in 1769, Mr. Wesley sent over a variety of itinerating professionals. A great variety of them came: men like Joseph Pilmore, Richard Boardman, Robert Williams, John King, Francis Asbury, Richard Wright, Thomas Rankin, George Shadford, Joseph Yearby, James Dempster, Martin Rodda, and William Glendenning.

In that list of professional itinerants that try to carve out a revived Anglican faith in the British colonies, one stands out above them all, and that is Francis Asbury. For you see that when the winds of war began to blow across British North America, many Americans became tired of what they felt was their lack of rights within the British Empire. John Wesley did not side with them. He, being a loyal Englishman, felt that the Americans were making a mistake. So American Methodism, or Wesleyan Methodism which was so tied to Britain, was of such a nature that Mr. Wesley withdrew his preachers.
All of his preachers returned home save one, and that man is the organizer of American Methodism. He is Francis Asbury. His story really is a cameo of the story of many young Methodist men who went out to preach. He was born of an English gardener and a godly mother, limited schooling. In fact, he was dismissed from school for not pursuing his assignments and apprenticed to a blacksmith for a trade at the age of thirteen. At the age of fourteen, his mother took him to a Methodist meeting where he was converted to Christ. At the age of sixteen he became an itinerant preacher.

In 1771, he volunteered for missionary service in America, arriving in the same year. He is the only man of these preachers to stay during the era of the American Revolution. And after the American Revolution, he organized American Methodism. In 1784, Wesley ordained Thomas Coke and sent him to America as a joint superintendent with Asbury; on Christmas Day in 1784 in Baltimore, Coke ordained Asbury to the Methodist ministry, and you have the beginning of the American Methodist Church.

Asbury, however, did not enjoy the title of co-superintendent because he felt that he had struggled through the Era of the Revolution, and he should guide the Methodist Church alone. So he took upon himself the title of bishop. He traveled incessantly. He visited society after society and led the church for over forty-five years. One writer has said of Francis Asbury that he ruled the Methodist Church with an iron fist in a velvet glove. He was a tremendous organizer. He organized circuits, quarterly meetings, and conferences. He was a great administrator, directing the church for over thirty-two years. And at the heart of Francis Asbury, as is in the heart of Methodist preachers at this time, was the spirit of revivalism. They were preachers.

Now the structure of American Methodism is this. American Methodism is composed of basically three layers. The churches were called societies. That was the local church. Within each local church was a class made up of about fifteen individuals from the local society, and each class was subdivided into a band of five or six people. So within American Methodism there was a high degree of accountability within the system. All met for worship in society without pastors but with lay leadership. The society would be divided into classes for study and divided into bands for prayer. When the itinerating circuit rider came to the societies, he would have a camp meeting. And that’s how the organizational structure of American Methodism was organized.
What I am saying is this. The father of American Methodism is the great Francis Asbury. We have in America today Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, recognizing by its name the importance of Francis Asbury. We also have a famous bookstore, Cokesbury Bookstore, named after Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, the original two co-superintendents of American Methodism. However, Asbury did not accept that co-superintendency and directed Methodism alone as bishop the last thirty-two years of his life. American Methodism, by the sheer grind and the sheer energy of commitment and discipline, carried the gospel into the West and was greatly blessed of the Lord and became a great and magnificent church.

So there are four major denominations that I feel compelled to be sure that you have in your minds. And then we’ll stretch their history down to the present day. I want you to clearly know where Congregationalists came from: Pilgrims, Puritans, Presbyterians, Scots-Irish, Continental Reformed groups, English Puritans. Baptists came from Regular Baptists, Separate Baptists, the relationship of Roger Williams, and now American Methodism.

Please be aware that Mr. Wesley did not purpose to found a Methodist Church; he purposed to found societies that would reform the church of his ordination, which is Anglicanism. In America, however, after the American Revolution, American Methodists separated at the Christmas conference in 1784 and founded the American church. This greatly hurt John Wesley, and Methodists in England after his death founded British Methodism in 1795.

Now this brings us to our last subject in the colonial period, and that is the rise or the development of the American Revolution. This issue has been one of considerable debate in America today. There are some who suggest to us that America’s founding was distinctly evangelical and Christian. Others suggest to us that America’s founding was distinctly a product of the religious enlightenment or political enlightenment of the day and America had a secular beginning. What I would like to do as best as I understand is to describe the American Revolution.

Before I do that, it seems only fair that I describe for you my understanding of the place of religion in the Great Revolution. It seems to me that the American nation was founded when two things were occurring. The grip of Christianity in British North America was beginning to decline. Simultaneously with the
decline of Christianity was the emergence of the Enlightenment. So it seems fair to me that scholars can actually see both. They can see deep Christian influences in the birth of the nation, and yet other scholars are equally right in seeing many things that are certainly not evangelical Christianity but Christianity at least in a broad, vague sense. We will comment upon that more as we come to the political influence that underlies the great American Revolution.

But let me begin by taking up the American revolt, the separation from Britain. A very fine book on this whole issue of Americans and their participation in the American Revolution has been written by Mark Noll. I highly recommend that book to you, for he clearly demonstrates that Christians had to make some very serious and sober decisions. Not all Christians, as they read the Holy Scriptures, were convinced that revolution was biblically warranted. Many dear Christians did, but not all of them. Many fled to Canada to be under what they supposed was their rightful government. So in all wars, the decisions that one would make are not clear-cut. They are very, very difficult, and Christians in this war found themselves divided as well.

Now let me begin by talking about religion as a cause of the American Revolution. Scholars have tended to point out the influence of the first Great Awakening. Some have suggested that one fruit of the Great Awakening that swept through the colonies was that it created a sense of inter-colonial unity. It bound the colonies together, and that cohesive unity was exploited and used in the American Revolution. As I think of this thesis, I find it very difficult to perceive; I doubt if there really was a deep sense of inter-colonial unity.

When Mr. Washington was fighting in Massachusetts, he found that the citizens of that colony or emerging state would bear arms. But when moved into the Jerseys, he was faced with massive desertions. That seems as though the colonists were willing to defend their territory but were not willing to defend other's territories. So I personally wonder about the notion of inter-colonial unity.

I think the first Great Awakening did impact upon the coming of the revolution in two very important ways. One was the prevalence of optimism or post-millennialism. It seems as though that religious optimism of success and victory over evil was secularized and politicalized in the rhetoric of the American Revolution. So the
great enemy of state now was perceived to be the British Empire and Parliament, if not the king.

Secondly, the Great Awakening influenced the coming of revolution in that in the first Great Awakening, you have the insipient rise of what is called “Unitarianism,” which is a degenerate form of orthodox Calvinism. For instance, you see it in men like Jonathan Mayhew and Ebenezer Gay and Charles Chauncy. At least in the case of Jonathan Mayhew, you have a firebrand for separation from England. He was of a Unitarian persuasion, which was a fruit of the polarization of Congregationalism in the context of the New Light-Old Light controversy. So in some senses, the Great Awakening did have an impact upon the coming of the American Revolution.

Second was the fear of the state imposition of Episcopalianism. The story goes like this. With the end of the French and Indian War—called “Seven Year’s War” in Europe which officially ended with the Treaty of Paris—many feared that English political control through the Anglican Episcopate was going to overshadow the nation. Isaac Backus, the Baptist, said it well. He said, “Where Episcopalian had all power of government, they have never allowed others so much liberty.” Many colonists saw an aggressive, British government. They argued that where the British government flexes its strength, it imposes British religion (Anglicanism). And where Anglicanism or Episcopalianism is in power, others are denied the rights of existence; so many would have gone out into the war fearing the coming shadow of Anglicanism.

Third, the fear of British-sponsored Roman Catholic encroachment, this goes with the former one to a degree as a purpose in that by the Treaty of Paris which ended the Seven Years’ War, the French and Indian War here. Canada was annexed to Great Britain, as was, by the Quebec Act of 1774, that territory north of the convergence of the Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers, Indiana, Illinois, and north. In that area, Catholicism was officially sanctioned by the British government. Now for a people in a tradition couched in the great Reformation, the sanctioning of Roman Catholic control of the Northwest Territory, as it was called, was an occasion of great fear. I am saying this; there are many reasons for the American Revolution.

Some fought in the American Revolution because of fear of Anglicanism. Baptists feared Anglicanism in Virginia. And
wherever the Anglicans were in power, John Leland would say, “Baptists do not enjoy the same.” Isaac Backus would share the same sympathy. There was fear that somehow there was a papal plot with the British government and Parliament to seize control of the frontier of the nation. It reminded Protestant colonists of the Great Reformation. So there are many reasons for the Great Revolution.

Perhaps most dominant and formative is point D, the Dominant Politico-religious Philosophy of the Day. It seems to me that the great documents of our state—the original documents, meaning the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—find their origins in two politico-religious philosophies, one or the other and actually a combination of both. One is the political theory of John Locke, which is as expressed in two treatises on government, was a social contract theory of government itself. The other is the rise of Scottish Common sense philosophy.

It seems to me that we must understand both Lockean political frameworks and Scottish Common Sense to interpret correctly the American Revolution and our two documents. Scottish Common Sense, of course, would have been taught at a place like Princeton College where James Madison, the framer (or the father) of the Constitution studied. It was taught at William and Mary, where the great Thomas Jefferson was a student and lawyer. Lockeanism seems to have been taught in the New England colleges influencing, among others, John Adams.

So let me talk for a moment about the dominant politico-religious philosophy that undergirded our great documents of state. Perhaps I should pause for a moment and say this about the American Revolution. I think that the primary colonial gripe was that the British Empire was trying to fix taxes upon us that we had not entitled the British government to exact. I think we mentioned it when we first started in a very brief fashion, but let me say it here; you can put it in the margin of your notes, because I think it’s quite apropos.

It seems to me that when Britain started her colonial empire, she started her colonial empire without a clear-cut theory of the relationship of parent to child. And that relationship was allowed to go through a period of undefined policy or statuary neglect for over 150 years. So the colonies enjoyed a great degree of freedom for over a century. I’m not sure at all that the Parliament wanted to imply what the American colonists, or at least a fringe of them,
wanted to interpret by that negligence.

That negligence came to a rapid end in the Seven Years’ War, because England, coming out of the great Seven Years’ War, found herself with an empty treasury. She could not wage war if she needed to. In that state of economic peril, Parliament tried desperately to increase revenues. She was already taxing her people inordinately in the homeland.

So through a series of tax programs—the Grenville tax program, the Townshend tax program, and the North tax program—Britain tried to recoup her treasury by exacting taxes throughout her empire: a Sugar Act, a Currency Act, a Stamp Act. Every official document had to have a British stamp on it for it to be legal, and they would charge for that. I find that England is seriously trying to recoup her finances while the colonies resist that orientation. It led, for instance, to the Stamp Act Congress in which the colonists said that you could tax us for what we import but not for what we generate within the colony itself. Seems to me that England backed down and only taxed for what was imported. But then the British citizens in America do not abide by that, and they rebel against external taxes such as the Tea Tax, the Glass Tax, and so on. This leads, obviously, to the Committee on Correspondence and an escalation of affairs at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill (which is Breed’s Hill) leading up to the Declaration of Independence.

Now it would seem to me that if I were an economic historian, such as in the Charles Baird tradition, that I would have deep justification for my theory. I think it’s one of the factors, and perhaps the catalytic factor, that precipitates a willingness to precipitate rebellion against Britain. To understand the American Revolution and the American revolutionary documents is to understand two political philosophies, as I have said. One is John Locke, which I think is most important, and the other is what is called Scottish Common Sense. Scottish Common Sense will dominate the nineteenth century in our colleges and moral philosophy.

But let me begin with John Locke, and you have a flavor for his ideas. John Locke was born in Pensford in Somersetshire near Bristol, England, and educated at Christ Church College in Oxford (taking both a B.A. and an M.A.) where he studied medicine and scientific method. When he finished his formal training, he became a tutor in the family of the Earl of Shaftesbury, who was
Secretary of Trade. It’s there that he began to develop and express his political theories.

The tenor of that era—during which the Stuarts were restored to the dynasty of England after the upheaval of the Puritans—was one in which there was deep political discussion about the monarchy. At the same time that you have John Locke writing, you also have Thomas Hobbs writing, taking political theory in a distinctly opposite direction. Religiously, John Locke was a loyal Anglican. He believed, for instance, that God existed. He believed in the authority of Scripture, the immortality of the soul. His major writings included such things as an essay on human understanding which we will comment upon in a moment, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, his great political treatise *Two Treatises on Government*, and a brief essay which summarizes his thought in a succinct fashion called *Essay on Toleration*.

John Locke, I believe, was the foremost political philosopher of the American Revolution. American leaders adopted Locke, not to create a limited monarchy as Locke sought, but to separate the British colonies from the monarchy and erect a separate state. John Locke’s theory of knowledge is what is called “empiricism.” He was a leader of empiricist thought in England in which he simply argued that the knowledge of God is not innate; it is a product of reason that we are born with blank minds—*tabula rasa*, as he would say.

We acquire information through the senses: touch, taste, and smell. And that is the origin of all that we know. He is an empiricist. He was not a deist, as we will say later. He believed in the necessity of revelation, the insufficiency of natural revelation. He accepted many of the miracles as proof of revelation. He believed that deists were atheists. I find John Locke really a transitional figure. He is moving away from received orthodoxy but not yet totally in the enlightened world, which would have rejected revelation.

I have summarized Locke’s views by just taking bits and pieces of his letter on toleration, and they are printed out for you in your outline notes. Let me just read a few. Now what I want you to see—which is so important to our documents of state—is that John Locke taught a social contract theory of entitlement, rights delegated by the consent of the governed to entitle a political government.
For instance, of the state he says that the state functions to protect property privilege. It functions as happiness in the Declaration of Independence. It functions in civic and not religious sphere. It has no power over religious societies or individual religious beliefs. John Locke believed, as the Enlightenment thinkers did, that a man should have no tyranny over him, no authority over him. He believed in what is called *laissez-faire* political theory, that every man is a judge to himself of what is right. The church is a free, voluntary, spontaneous society. It has no authority of leadership except by consent. And that consenting theory becomes part of our political theory. It has no jurisdiction in civil matters.

So religion for John Locke looked like this; everyone is orthodox to himself, that I determine orthodoxy by my consent to it. You can see that presuppositionally, John Locke, though he does not, seems to ultimately deny objective authority from above. He finds it from below. He says, for instance, that man must follow the dictates of his own conscience, that every man is his own judge, that each church is a voluntary society, that each church is orthodox to itself.

Now Locke and religious limitation all are free of dominion by anyone in matters of religion, but no one should be free of religion. And this is fundamentally important to understand our documents of state. While the first amendment guarantees freedom of religion, it does not, as I interpret it within the context of the era, affirm freedom from religion. Locke would say there is to be freedom of opinion except for infidels and apostates, infidels meaning the Islamic faith and those who deny orthodox Christianity.

So he would say that everyone must believe that God exists, that He must be worshipped, He must believe in the immortality of the soul, that one must obtain God’s favor, they must believe the Bible is true, and the conscience is free. So he would oppose all who undermine civil authority. He would oppose the intolerant. He would oppose treason, which is the only capitally-punished crime within the Constitution, and oppose all atheists.

John Locke would favor the creation of a state in which all are free to live by the dictates of their own conscience; but having said that, he has basically a religious set of moral assumptions that become the glue that ties society together. This is not the secularly humanist state as we are taught to suppose that it was at the beginning. It is a theistic state. John Locke would have a
nation built in which everyone believed that God existed, He was to be worshiped, and the Bible was true. However, that is not to say that it was deeply Christian, to believe that God exists and the Bible is true, while that may be the glue of culture that does not make one a Christian. It makes them a small “c” Christian but not a capital “C”. The missing person in our great documents of state is the Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe that this country was born as a secular country that sanctioned religion as the glue of society. Now John Locke and *The Two Treatises of Government*; this is that grand, fundamental political thesis that the American intellectuals read and consumed among others. It was written during the reign of Charles II in an attempt to limit the monarchy. And what he basically says is this. John Locke was a social contract theorist, that all government is bilateral government, that government is derived from the consent of the governed, that we all lived at one time in a state of natural freedom. But we could not maintain our freedoms, so we determined to give up some of our freedoms, entitling someone else to govern over us to protect us. And when that entitlement does not fulfill its obligations, then we have a duty to rebel against it.