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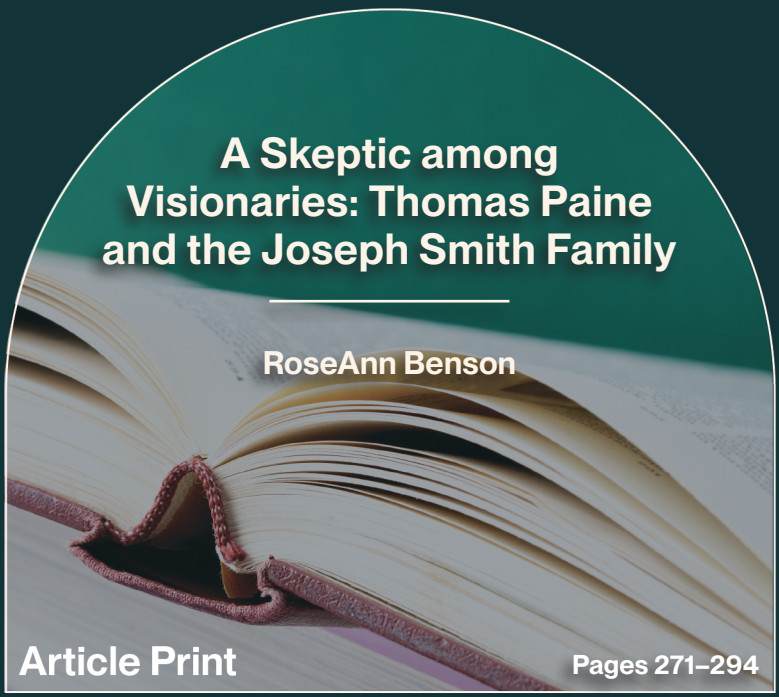

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A Skeptic among Visionaries: Thomas Paine and the Joseph Smith Family

RoseAnn Benson

Abstract: *Thomas Paine's* The Age of Reason *challenged Christianity's foundational claims during a period when Enlightenment rationalism and the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening competed for influence in post-Revolutionary America. Paine's Deism rejected biblical authority, divine revelation, and the divinity of Jesus Christ, favoring reason, scientific observation, and the natural world as sources of religious truth. These competing philosophies intersected within the extended family of Joseph Smith Jr., whose members held differing views on Calvinism, Universalism, religious enthusiasm, and the restoration of primitive Christianity. In 1803, Asael Smith reportedly threw a copy of* The Age of Reason *into his son Joseph Smith Sr.'s home, urging him to read it rather than attend Methodist meetings. Examination of the religious convictions and experiences of Asael, Joseph Sr., Lucy Mack Smith, and other family members suggests that Asael's confrontation reflected opposition to revivalist practices rather than wholesale acceptance of Paine's skepticism. Although Asael's precise motives remain uncertain, his subsequent acceptance of the Book of Mormon and his grandson's prophetic calling illustrates the Smith family's enduring commitment to Christianity and divine revelation.*

To consider how Thomas Paine's philosophy, as presented in the three editions of his controversial pamphlet, *The Age of Reason*, may have affected the Smith family, this paper will provide a brief background and broad context of religion and philosophy in post-Revolutionary America. That will lead to a short discussion of Paine's

particular beliefs. More context will then be provided by giving a brief overview of the religious beliefs of various members of the extended Smith family. The paper concludes with a likely hypothesis of what effect the pamphlet had on the Smiths' extended family and, specifically, on Joseph Smith Jr.

Context and Background

To provide some background for this paper, one needs to turn to the European philosopher, John Locke, and the American Baptist preacher, Roger Williams. These men were among many others who advocated for a separation of ecclesiastic and civic authority. The establishment clause in the First Amendment prohibited a national church, but state-supported religion was still allowed. Most of the original thirteen colonies all had state-sponsored religions (see table 1), each of them receiving direct financial support via taxes and oaths of loyalty to the major tenets of the religion. These oaths were even required for the opportunity to vote or to run for office.

Table 1. Established, state-sponsored religions in the original thirteen colonies.

Colony	State-sponsored Religion	Disestablishment
New Hampshire	Congregational	1817–1819
Massachusetts	Congregational	1833
Rhode Island	none	
Connecticut	Congregational	1818
New York	Church of England	1777
New Jersey	none	
Pennsylvania	none	
Delaware	none	
Maryland	Church of England	1810
Virginia	Church of England	1786
North Carolina	Church of England	1776
South Carolina	Church of England	1778/1790
Georgia	Church of England	1798

Disestablishment, on the other hand, was the beginning of what Thomas Jefferson would later call a "wall of separation" between church and state as well as abolition of religious tests of faith. Freedom of religion led to unfettered religious expression and the splintering of Protestant churches, creating a lively competition for converts.

The First Great Awakening was a religious revival movement that affected the thirteen American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. Its main emphasis was personal conversion, often called a *new birth*. The Second Great Awakening, referred to as the "Great Reformation of the Nineteenth Century," immediately followed the American Revolution and had a great effect on spreading Christianity, countering Deism (explained later in this paper), and promoting social reform in the new country. It began at the end of the eighteenth century and reached its peak during the 1830s and 1840s.[1] Although the Second Great Awakening took place on American soil, its roots were in the British Isles in the Anglican reform ideas of John Wesley. In America, this religious awakening was primarily a Protestant Christian revival that spawned a new and dynamic religious fervor, which enshrined revolutionary ideals of liberty, democracy, and equality. The movement was populist, evangelical, ecstatic, personal, optimistic, and widespread. It contrasted greatly with traditional high church, priest-led rituals of elaborate music, ornate altars, and stately priesthood vestments such as found in Anglican, Lutheran, and some Presbyterian churches.[2]

The theological ideals and paucity of rituals in this American Protestant revival appealed especially to the less educated, the poor, and the unchurched because it had a flavor of egalitarian, democratic, and republican ideology; ideals which were promoted in the American Revolution. This revival era was characterized by "seekers" of the primitive New Testament church, as well as others looking for a spiritual home in the fledgling nation. Many hearts were turned to the Lord through the efforts of itinerant or traveling preachers and especially the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians who held large multi-day revival-style camp meetings, converting the unchurched and regenerating spiritually lukewarm Christians.[3] Historian Mark Noll identifies the period from the Revolution to the Civil War—the Second Great

1. This is discussed in detail in Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, 4th ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 106.
2. For one discussion of "high-church" versus "low-church," see Robin Douglas, "The Eucharist of the Latter-day Saints: The Sacrament in the Broader Christian Context," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 271–94, interpreterfoundation.org/ journal/the-eucharist-of-the-latter-day-saints-the-sacrament-in-the-broader-christian-context/.
3. Williams, *America's Religions*, 190–91; see also James D. Bratt, ed., *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), xvi.

Awakening — as the most influential revival of Protestant Christianity in American history.[4]

Generally, Protestant churches in the early nineteenth century embraced the tenets of reformer John Calvin. Those tenets, sometimes referred to as *petals*, are briefly summarized in the appendix of this paper. Other new religious groups were considered "outsiders," such as Alexander Campbell's Reforming Baptist Church (later called the Disciples of Christ) and Joseph Smith's Church of Christ (later called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Although both were restorationist movements tied to primitive Christianity, and were decidedly non-Calvinist, they came from very different ends of the religious spectrum. Campbell's ideas were based on common sense, reason, and the rational and logical thinking of Enlightenment philosophy. In contrast, many of Joseph Smith Jr.'s beliefs in visions, visitations, revelations, and healing fit more easily into what was labeled *enthusiasm*.[5] Enthusiasm was an epithet that lumped together all forms of revival by those who were anti-revivalists. Sober-minded rationalists worried that religious excitement (such as often occurred at revival meetings and derogatorily referred to as *enthusiasm*, *fanaticism*, or *extravagance*) promoted extreme emotionalism that would manipulate truth and cause believers to be deluded into false forms of worship and perhaps eventually lead to disbelief in "real" Christianity.[6]

One of Alexander Campbell's main goals was to keep the American Deists as Christian believers, unlike many of the European intellectual elites. His restoration approach to the ancient order of the primitive Church appealed to rational thinking and nodded to the scientific method being applied to religion by creating a small box of essential factual beliefs that all could agree upon. Joseph Smith Jr.'s

4. Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 151–52. See also David Edwin Harrell, *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 239; Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 12–13.
5. RoseAnn Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: 19th Century Restorationists* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and Abilene Christian University, 2017), 2–3.
6. Bratt, *Antirevivalism*, xvii–xviii, 5. See also Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, eds., *Peter Oliver's Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961), 15–20; David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

Restoration, which included both the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit and offices of the ancient Church, was an exponential upsizing of Christianity. Campbell believed he could keep the Deists faithful in a downsized Christianity, whereas Smith's approach was an uncontainable expansion of Christianity. Hence, one reason for Campbell's strongly negative critique of the Book of Mormon and his ill-tempered response to Joseph Smith Jr. and the so-called "Mormonites" was this desire to retain the educated elite as rational believers in Jesus Christ. Smith's unfolding enlargement, based in what was considered *enthusiasm* rather than *Enlightenment*, would make Campbell's defense of the "restoration of the ancient order of things" impossible.[7]

During this time, Enlightenment philosophy and Western Christianity were engaged in a fight for dominance. Just as Greek philosophy had a huge influence over the early Christian Church — particularly after the death of most of the Apostles — Enlightenment philosophy had a far-reaching effect on the splintering beliefs of Protestantism.

A religious movement called *Deism* grew out of Enlightenment philosophy. Deists accepted God, or a Supreme Being, but some did not accept Jesus Christ. Deists were free-thinking rationalists who believed that religious principles were part of the natural order and could be observed by anyone.[8] They rejected inherited authority — both ecclesiastical and secular — and had great confidence in the ability of humans and in their future.[9] To them, reason and observation were sufficient evidence that a Creator exists, according to this natural religious philosophy, albeit a disengaged and non-interventionist God.

From a Deist's point of view, logic dictated that the universe was a self-sufficient machine that ran on its own. A popular metaphor likened God to a clockmaker who wound up the world clock that perpetually runs without his further involvement. Deism's emphasis on human inquiry, rational thinking, personal freedom, and individuality was especially appealing to the educated elite of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some seventeenth-century Enlightenment philosophers promoted Deism as a comprehensive religion that would be

7. Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith*, 58–59.
8. In the Declaration of Independence, phrases such as "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," point to an Enlightenment philosophical view emphasizing reason.
9. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144.

an intellectual and social improvement on traditional Christianity. They believed that ordinary human intellect could understand God without the need for revelation, and that this would "cleanse Christianity of its supernaturalist superstitions."[10]

Thomas Paine wrote that Deism, "without the possibility of being deceived, [teaches] all that is necessary or proper to be known."[11] In addition to Paine, others likely espousing a form of Deism or skepticism regarding some tenets of Christian orthodoxy were early American Founders such as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe.[12]

The Philosophy of Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine, considered by some to have been a Founding Father, published an important revolutionary pamphlet in January 1776. *Common Sense,* as it was called, argued for American independence rather than merely relief from "taxation without representation" and reconciliation with England. Paine's pamphlet begins with a powerful condemnation of the British monarchy by quoting the words of Gideon, a judge in Israel who led the children of Israel to victory over the Midianites, but declined their offer of kingship (see Judges 8:22–23). The pamphlet also includes a conversation between the prophet Samuel and God against kingship (see 1 Samuel 8:4–9). In fifty-four bullet points, Paine points out the deficiencies, evils, and absurdities of the hereditary monarchy

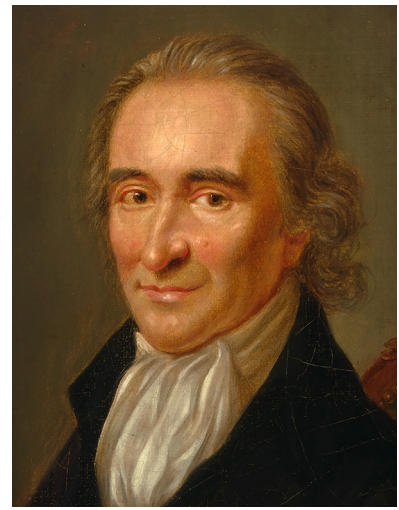


Figure 1. *Thomas Paine* (detail), portrait by Laurent Dabos, ca. 1792. Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. (Image in the public domain.)

10. Noll, *America's God*, 143–44.
11. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Paris, 1794; London, 1795; New York, 1807), Part Second, Section 21.
12. David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49, 51. See also Mark David Hall, "The Myth of the Founders' Deism," in *Did America Have a Christian Founding?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=hist_fac.

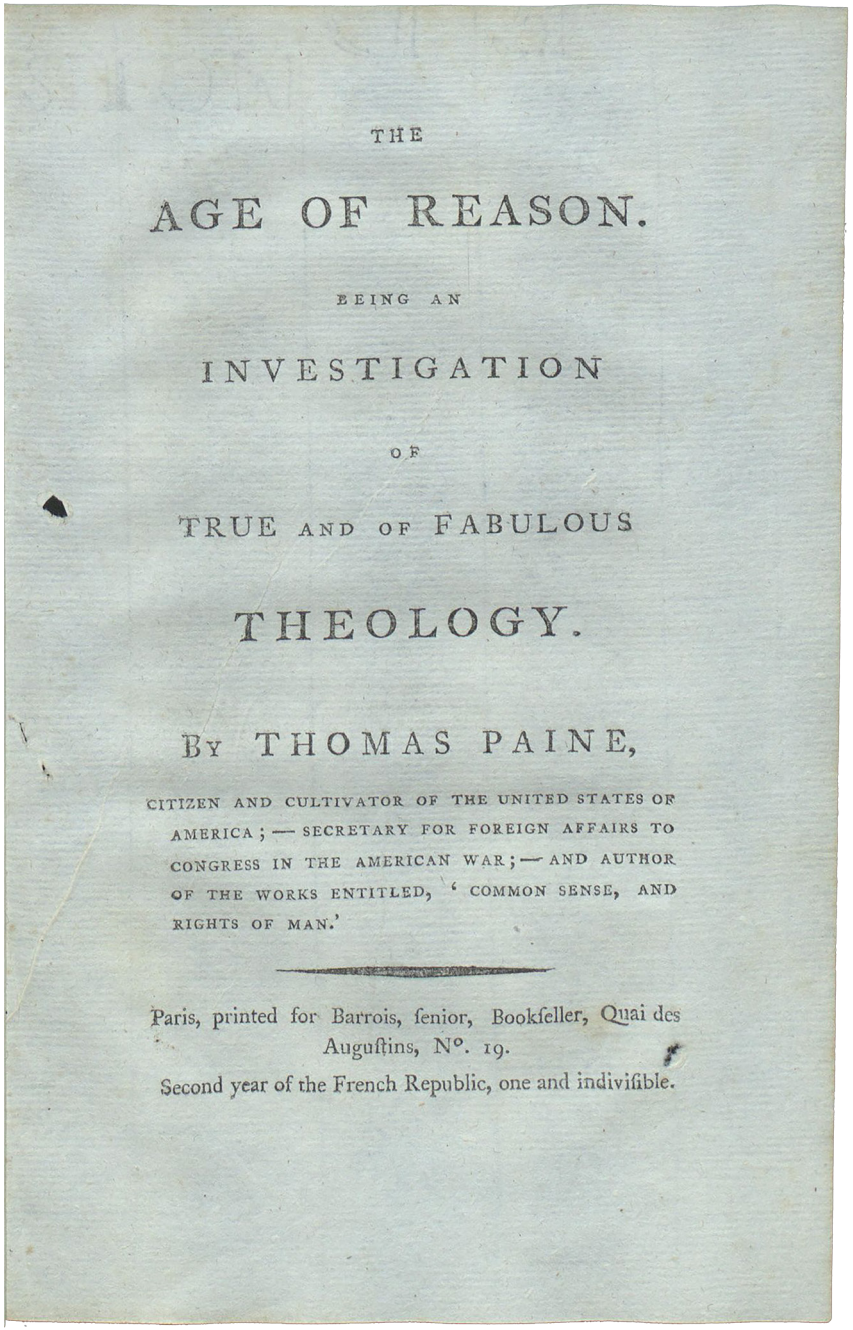
in England. He then arrives at his main point regarding the issue of American independence:

> The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or of a kingdom, but of a continent — of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of continental union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.[13]

In the third edition of *Common Sense*, published a month later in February 1776, Paine added an appendix that includes these prescient words: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present hath not happened since the days of Noah until now."[14] He exhorts Americans not to shrink from "the times that try men's souls" and to be more than a "summer soldier and sunshine patriot." These were words that were crucial in encouraging many to join in fighting the War of Independence.[15] Paine, rightly hailed as the "Founding Father of the American Revolution," was held in high regard by most American revolutionaries.

Paine may have been a hero in 1776, but his reputation suffered greatly in the eyes of many Christians with a second pamphlet, the 1794 publication of *The Age of Reason* and its subtitle: *Being an Investigation of True and of Fabulous Theology*.[16] He published his treatise against orthodox Christianity in three parts — 1794, 1795, and 1807 (see figure 2) — with this thesis:

13. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (London: J. Watson, 1776), point #58.
14. Paine, *Common Sense*, February 1776, point #161.
15. Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*, December 1775, archive.org/details/americancrisis0000pain.
16. Although some have inflated the number of *Common Sense* pamphlets sold, best estimates of Paine's most popular production are probably about 75,000. On the other hand, *The Age of Reason*, hailed by one historian as a "runaway best seller" (Susan Staker, "Better Bibles: Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism," [paper given at Mormon History Association conference, Rochester, New York, 10 June 2023], 1, academia.edu/103909506), was not nearly as popular. Paine self-financed the shipping of 15,000 copies of *The Age of Reason* from France to America, and a later edition sold 2,000 copies.



THE

AGE OF REASON.

BEING AN

INVESTIGATION

OF

TRUE AND OF FABULOUS

THEOLOGY.

BY THOMAS PAINE,

CITIZEN AND CULTIVATOR OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA; — SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO CONGRESS IN THE AMERICAN WAR; — AND AUTHOR OF THE WORKS ENTITLED, 'COMMON SENSE, AND RIGHTS OF MAN.'

Paris, printed for Barrois, ſenior, Bookſeller, Quai des Auguſtins, N°. 19.

Second year of the French Republic, one and indiviſible.

Figure 2. Title page of the Paris edition of *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794. (Image in the public domain.)

> Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity.[17]

One historian calls the writing in *The Age of Reason* a "rhetoric of ridicule."[18] In the pamphlet, Paine unites *pathos* (passion; anger or sympathy), *logos* (reason and logic), and *ethos* (his own status as a brilliant Founding Father) to seek popular acclaim and reduce his opponents to shame.[19]

In *Common Sense,* Paine had invoked the names of the Old Testament judge Gideon and the prophets Samuel and Noah and their relationship with God, whereas his writing in *The Age of Reason* had a very different religious point of view. He states that his purpose is to put forth his religious opinions based upon his powers of reason, what he defined as the frankness of the mind communicating with itself, or "mentally faithful."[20] At the outset, he declares his support of differing opinions. From his point of view, however, reason was the best tool for defense against error — meaning that he was right in his deistic view, while Christians were wrong.

Paine seems well-aware that many in America would not approve of his ideas against organized religion.[21] His revolutionary writings against monarchy and for liberty, equality, and brotherhood were apparently not truly Old Testament ideals that he embraced, as evidenced by his later writings. Instead, they were Enlightenment-based ideas, using the Bible to appeal to the religious sentiments of many readers. He was an Enlightenment-driven and reasoned advocate of

17. Paine, *Age*, Part Second, Section 21.
18. Jared M. Halverson, "Serious Laughter and Common Sense: The Rhetoric of Ridicule in Alexander Campbell's Anti-Mormon Delusions," 45, academia.edu/18724146.
19. Jared M. Halverson, "Religion, Ridicule, and *The Age of Reason*," 2, academia.edu/18723769.
20. Paine, *Age*, Part First, Section 1.
21. Paine, *Age*, Part First, Section 1. As context for Paine's resolve to express his beliefs in writing, the French Revolution had devolved into murderous anarchy as the monarchy was replaced by a new republic. The radical revolutionaries authorized the Reign of Terror including the horrifying use of the guillotine against the royalists and others who disagreed with them, which Paine adamantly opposed. Like others, Paine was imprisoned and apparently barely escaped the guillotine himself. He saw the upheaval in France as at least partially due to what he characterized as an adulterous relationship between church and state.

social upheaval, and he felt compelled to set forth what he considered important foundational religious beliefs for why Deists, such as himself, believed in God but not in Jesus Christ.[22]

In general, Deists believed in a non-interventionist Supreme Being and in reason rather than revelation. They opposed Trinitarian beliefs (including the divinity of Jesus Christ), the authority and divine origin of the Bible, and the authority of clerics. Paine's writing was not a lament for the loss of the previous national order of priesthood (Catholicism), nor for compulsive systems of religion (official state-sponsored religion), nor for articles of beliefs (creeds). Rather, they were a concern that, in the dissolution of superstition — meaning false systems of government and theology — mankind could also lose morality, humanity, and true theology.[23] He asserts that national churches were "human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."[24] In fact, after he wrote *Common Sense*, Paine claims to have foreseen that the revolution in government would lead to a revolution in religion, and labels the relationship between church and state as adulterous.[25] "I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy."[26]

In *The Age of Reason,* he rejects "pretended" special missions purportedly communicated by God to certain individuals such as Moses, Mohomet (Muhammad), and Jesus Christ. Thus, Paine dismisses the revelatory nature of scripture, such as the Hebrew Bible, the Qur'an, and the New Testament — the foundations of several national religions — because he said that revelation meant something directly or immediately communicated by God to one human. From his point of view, this meant revelation could only be first-hand. In his thinking, no one was required to believe second-hand communication, whether it was oral or written, because that would be hearsay.[27] Therefore, he declared, in regard to so-called "hearsay," "I do not choose to rest my belief upon such evidence."[28] His belief was in the God of Creation

22. Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith*, 76.
23. Paine, *Age*, Part First, Section 1. Paine demonstrated his morality and humanity by opposing the beheading of King Louis XVI, and for this he was jailed until James Monroe procured his release.
24. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 1.
25. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 1.
26. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 1.
27. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 1.
28. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 1.

which, in his view, did not include Jesus Christ or any other supernal being.

Although Paine claimed that he meant no disrespect, noting Jesus's virtue and benevolence, he found Christianity no different than, nor superior to, any other ancient system of morality, such as the gods worshiped by the Greeks or Romans. In his publication, he concludes his disbelief in the biblical narrative of the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the work of

> Christian Mythologists, calling themselves the Christian Church, [who] have erected their fable, which, for absurdity and extravagance, is not exceeded by anything that is to be found in the mythology of the ancients.[29]

Paine then moves to an examination of the Old and New Testaments. His points illustrate that he was very familiar with them, and his criticism of them was unrelenting. He believed their narratives were a disservice to God:

> When we contemplate the immensity of that Being, who directs and governs the incomprehensible WHOLE, of which the utmost ken of human sight can discover but a part, we ought to feel shame at calling such paltry stories the word of God.[30]

In 1795, Paine published Part II of *The Age of Reason*, continuing with his critique of Bible credibility, stating,

> It is not the antiquity of a tale that is an evidence of its truth; on the contrary, it is a symptom of its being fabulous; for the more ancient any history pretends to be, the more it has the resemblance of a fable. The origin of every nation is buried in fabulous tradition, and that of the Jews is as much to be suspected as any other.[31]

Thomas Paine's reasoning led him to believe that the Bible was a "fabulous" fable.

In Part II, he also examines the books of the Old Testament and repudiates their authorship as well as the legitimacy of conquering the Promised Land. One of his major points regarding all the writings of the Old Testament is that they "were not written by the persons to

29. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 2.
30. Paine, *Age,* Part First, Section 2.
31. Paine, *Age*, Part Second, Section 1.

whom they are ascribed, nor till many years after their death."[32] He also observed that because "the New Testament . . . is founded upon the prophecies of the Old . . . it must follow the fate of its foundation."[33] In other words, because he believes he had disproven the veracity of the Old Testament, he also concluded that the New Testament could not be true.

In Part III of *The Age of Reason*, Paine examines prophecies about Jesus from the Old Testament that are referred to in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. His intent in Part III is to "show that these are not prophecies of the person called Jesus Christ, nor have reference to any such person."[34]

Enlightenment religious skeptics in America generally were Christian Deists, believing in Christ, as opposed to European Deists who, in general, did not. Deists reasoned that religious principles were part of the natural observable order. Alexander Campbell, the leader of the largest restoration movement in the nineteenth century, appealed to logic and rational interpretation of the scriptures in his attempt to restore the ancient order of Christianity. Unlike Paine's reasoning, which led him to reject the Bible, Campbell embraced the testimony of the scriptures as factual evidence revealed by God. One of Campbell's important contributions was keeping American Deists within the bounds of Christ's gospel, thus protecting America "from the threat of deism and unbelief."[35]

By contrast, Paine considered *reason* the choicest gift of God, writing: "It is only by the exercise of reason that man can discover God."[36] Rather than read scriptures, he believed *Creation* was God's word, which speaks universally to all, and which cannot be imitated or altered. He recommended the "scripture called the Creation" as the way to learn about God.[37] Instead of the Bible, he favored the study of "natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science, of which astronomy occupies the chief place," thus these works illustrating God's power and wisdom are "the true theology," and are what a "true Deist" ought to contemplate.[38] The combination of reason with the discovery of scientific principles was his theology. As a result of Paine's disillusionment with the marriage and corruption of church and

32. Paine, *Age*, Part Second, Section 6.
33. Paine, *Age*, Part Second, Section 14.
34. Paine, *Age,* Part Third, Section 1.
35. Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith*, 59.
36. Paine, *Age*, Part First, Section 7.
37. Paine, *Age*, Part First, Section 7.
38. Paine *Age*, Part First, Sections 8, 11.

state that he observed in Europe, he threw out all the foundations of Christianity, including Jesus Christ, to resort to what he felt was trustworthy, that being his faith in logic and science. *The Age of Reason* was meant to be a mocking critique of all in Christianity that required faith, and a treatise advocating the philosophy of a natural order of religion.

Religious Beliefs among the Smiths

How did the skeptical writings of Thomas Paine and the Smith family cross paths? To answer, it is important to understand the beliefs of some members of the Smith and Mack families (figure 3). The following sections provide an overview of those beliefs and serve as a background for how Lucy Mack Smith, a visionary seeker of truth and mother of a religious home, and Joseph Smith Sr., a visionary but non-institutional church seeker, responded to a challenge to read Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

Lucy Mack Smith's religious beliefs

Raised by a God-fearing mother, Lucy nevertheless suffered emotionally over the early deaths of her two older sisters, Lovisa and Lovina, in 1794. Additionally, she felt weighed down with deep feelings of inadequacy due to her lack of religious knowledge.[39] She recorded the following sentiments:

> I determined to obtain that which I had heard spoken so much of from the pulpit — a change of heart. To accomplish this I spent much of my time in reading the Bible and praying; but, notwithstanding my great anxiety to experience a change of heart, another matter would always interpose in all my meditations: — If I remain a member of no church, all religious people will say I am of the world; and, if I join some one of the different denominations, all the rest will say I am in error. No church will admit that I am right, except the one with which I am associated. This makes them witnesses against each other; and how can I decide in such a case

39. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 277, archive.org/details/LucysBook/page/276/mode/2up.

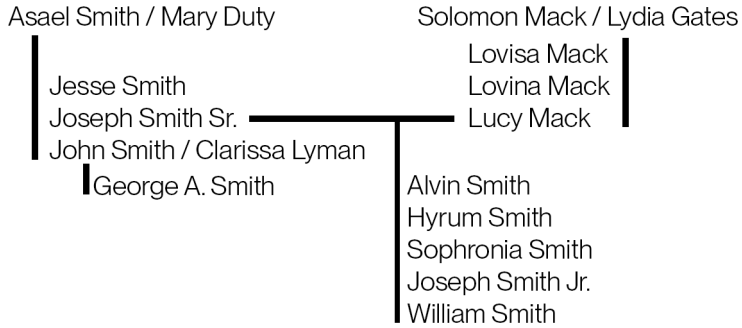


Figure 3. A partial extended family tree of the Smiths and Macks. Not all children of the families are listed, just those who are mentioned in this paper.

> as this, seeing they are all unlike the Church of Christ, as it existed in former days![40]

Lucy's father, Solomon Mack, recorded that, for most of his life, he was not interested in religion or in searching the Bible. That changed in his seventy-sixth year, long after his children were married. Aches, pains, and illness caused him to reconsider his ways and to begin praying and reading the Bible. Prior to his death ten years later in 1820, he testified "I have a love to all rich and poor, kings and nobles, black and white, come all to Jesus my friends, come to Jesus and he will in no wise cast you off."[41]

Two years later, in 1796, his daughter Lucy Mack married Joseph Smith Sr. The young couple lived in Tunbridge, Vermont, until 1802, when they moved briefly to Randolph, Vermont. While in Randolph, Lucy became deathly ill with consumption (tuberculosis). Doctors, family members, and even her husband were convinced she was dying. As the mother of two young children, Alvin and Hyrum, and being pregnant with Sophronia, Lucy pleaded with the Lord to heal her so that she could raise her young children and be a comfort to her husband. To secure such a promise, she "made a solemn covenant with God, that, if he would let me live, I would endeavor to serve him

40. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 257–58.

41. Solomon Mack, *A Narraitve* [sic] *of the life of Solomon Mack, containing an account of the many severe accidents he met with during a long series of years, together with the extraordinary manner in which he was converted to the Christian Faith* (Windsor, NH: self-published, c. 1811), 25.

according to the best of my abilities."[42] Still concerned about her lack of preparation for death, she recorded,

> I did not consider myself ready for such an awful event, inasmuch as I knew not the ways of Christ; besides, there appeared to be a dark and lonesome chasm, between myself and the Saviour, which I dared not attempt to pass.[43]

Lucy was healed from her illness, and recognizing that this blessing came as an answer to her pleading to God, she desired to fulfill her part of the covenant. She became an active seeker for a teacher of religion and a church that could be a home for her soul. She sought out others who she believed knew more about God and religion than she did, yet she was disappointed in her efforts to find a pious preacher whose teachings would resonate in her heart and comfort her spirit. Consequently, she wrote that "[I] determined to examine my Bible, and, taking Jesus and his disciples for my guide, to endeavour to obtain from God that which man could neither give nor take away."[44] She continued to search by attending traveling camp revival meetings and listening to all who preached. However, it was the Bible alone that became her "guide to life and salvation."[45] Eventually, she concluded that her mind would rest easier if she were baptized. Finally finding a minister who would baptize her without requiring membership in a particular church, she was baptized and then continued her singular pursuit to know God's will.[46]

Joseph Smith Sr.'s religious beliefs

Although the Smith family were long-time members of the Congregational Church, which was a reformed or Calvinist church, Asael and his sons Jesse and Joseph Sr. joined the local Universalist Society in Tunbridge, Vermont, shortly after Joseph's marriage to Lucy. The key doctrine of that church is evident in its name — that there is a universal salvation for all souls — Christ came to save all

42. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 277–78.
43. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 277.
44. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 280.
45. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 280.
46. She does not mention if her baptism at this time was by immersion or sprinkling. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 281. Later she briefly associated with the Presbyterian congregation, who would have been accepting of her previous baptism regardless of mode (p. 331). She was baptized by immersion into the Church of Jesus Christ, likely on 6 April 1830 (p. 477n276).



Figure 4. *Joseph Smith Sr. & Lucy Mack Smith: Noble Parents*, painting by Michael Bedard, 2015. (© Nauvoo Illinois Bedard Fine Art Gallery, bedardfinearts.com. Used by permission.)

sinners.[47] This signature doctrine was a significant departure from mainstream Calvinist Protestantism, which held to limited Atonement (see the appendix). The Smith family's religiosity appears to have been influenced more by "Enlightenment skepticism than by Calvinist evangelism."[48] Nevertheless, the Asael Smith family was "religiously committed but open-minded" and particularly devoted to scripture.[49] Their religious philosophy embraced an omni-benevolent God, but their skepticism rejected the supernatural events that occurred at the local revivals.

47. Interestingly, although not officially a church organization, the Universalist Society of which Asael was the moderator requested exemption from ecclesiastical taxes. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 17.
48. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 6, archive.org/details/josephsmithbegin0000bush/page/6/mode/2up.
49. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 111, archive.org/details/josephsmithsnewe0000ande/page/110/mode/2up.

Lucy's experience in being healed accentuated her desire to find a church for the family to attend together. Joseph Sr., on the other hand, was on the margins regarding institutional churches and had little confidence in their doctrines. Shortly after the birth of William, their last child, Joseph Sr.'s "mind became much excited upon the subject of religion; yet he would not subscribe to any particular system of faith, but contended for the ancient order, as established by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and his Apostles."[50] He was looking for a restoration of the early Christian Church from the meridian of time. One night, he had a vision in which he found himself in a barren world without "true religion, or plan of salvation" that was fiercely hostile to true wisdom and understanding.[51] Lucy wrote that from this prophetic experience, her husband concluded that the current "class of religionists" knew no more about the kingdom of God than those who professed no religion at all.[52]

Asael Smith's religious beliefs

Asael Smith had been baptized into the Congregational covenant as an infant, as were his wife and children. His great knowledge and memory of the Bible were part of family lore.[53] His adult foray into Universalist leanings meant he embraced God's grace for all his children, rather than the Calvinist-based limited Atonement of Jesus Christ, which was a central belief in most Christian churches. When the Universalist Society that he moderated dissolved, he continued in conventional Christianity in the Congregational church, but resolutely held to his belief in "universal restoration."[54]

From his personal writings, Asael's religious feelings were deep and sincere. On 10 April 1799, at the age of fifty-five — and thirty-one years before his death — he composed a letter to his family, to be read after his passing as a "spiritual will." In it, he affirmed the necessity of a Savior, but not of any particular religion or religious practice. He urges:

> You have to deal with an infinite majesty; you go upon life and death. Therefore, in this point be serious. . . When you think of him, speak of him, pray to him, or in any way make your addresses to his great majesty, be in good earnest" . . .

50. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 294.
51. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 295–96.
52. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 296.
53. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 111.
54. Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 28. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 17.

> I would wish you to search the scriptures and consult sound [reas]on . . . study the nature of religion. . . . Do all to God as to your father. . . . Satisfy your own consciences in what you do. . . . And for the Church of Christ: neither set her above her husband nor below her children; give her that honor, obedience and respect that is her due.[55]

The Age of Reason Causes Contention

Lucy tried out the Methodists, and although Joseph Sr. had little faith in their doctrines, she convinced him to accompany her a few times. Asael and Jesse Smith became agitated when they found out about Joseph Sr.'s apparent capitulation to a religious movement that participated in the enthusiasm-driven revival meetings that occurred regularly during the spring and summer in their region. According to Lucy, one spring day in 1803, Asael came to the door "and threw Tom Pains age of reason into the house and angrily bade him [Joseph Sr.] read that untill he believed it."[56] The account of this incident is recorded only in Lucy's 1844–45 preliminary draft of her biography. The later accounts, edited by Charles Coray in 1845 and Parley Pratt in 1853, reduced some of the passion and details in the story:

> I began to attend Methodist meetings, and, to oblige me, my husband accompanied me; but when this came to the ears of his father and oldest brother, they were so displeased, and said so much in regard to the matter, that my husband thought it best to desist. He said that he considered it as hardly worth our while to attend the meetings any longer, as it would prove of but little advantage to us; besides this, it gave our friends such disagreeable feelings. I was considerably hurt by this, yet I made no reply.[57]

Whether or how much Joseph Sr. read *The Age of Reason* is unknown. His oldest brother, Jesse, was considered the more orthodox believer in the Asael Smith family and was described as "entrenched in Calvinistic theology," particularly the idea of "limited

55. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 124–26, 128. It is worth noting that this letter was written 10 April 1799 just shortly after the marriage of Joseph and Lucy and while the Smith men were involved with the local Universalist Society (p. 129).
56. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 291.
57. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 291.

election" (see the appendix). The other Smith brothers were open-minded "seekers" with Joseph Sr. more intense in his search, but "too religious to commit himself to any church."[58]

From Lucy's recital of the incident where Asael and Jesse Smith denigrated Methodism, it appears they were very critical of some of the practices observed in the revival and tent meetings held in their vicinity each year. Alexander Campbell, an opponent of revivals, described the "Methodistic Enthusiasm" of his day as "the shrieks and howlings of the damned . . . thrown upon the canvass, with the wild and lurid coloring of a Rubens, and held up to the gaze of the weak and timid."[59] In general, the appellation *Methodist* refers to their "method" or focus on conversion as well as practice of Christianity, sometimes called a *holiness movement,* referring to a life free from sin. It appears, however, from Campbell's words, that he considered their conversion experiences more extravagant than reasonable. This may also have been the feeling of Asael and Jesse.[60]

According to first-hand reports and to the reports of several historians, some revival camp attendees manifested signs that were notable "for intensity and variety and the astonishing ease and rapidity with which they were communicated (affecting at times an entire congregation)."[61] Some burst into prayer, exhortation, or tears of compassion. Some participants were terrorized by their experience and either tried to escape or called out to Jesus to have mercy on them as they fainted and swooned.[62] "Falling down came to be a regular feature of the revival meetings, and it was customary to estimate the success of the meeting by the numbers who were affected in that manner."[63] Sometimes, those who were struck down awakened to deliver powerful sermons noteworthy for "length of time, [subject] matter, and loudness of voice."[64] Others participated in what were termed

58. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 111.
59. Bratt, *Antirevivalism*, 5.
60. Campbell's ideas on conversion are straightforward "simple faith in credible evidence" with an emphasis on reason and biblical facts or events. Benson, *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith*, 95.
61. Catherine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797–1805* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), 87.
62. Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival* (Cincinnati: E. and E. Hosford, 1808), 23, archive.org/details/kentuckyrevival00mcnegoog/page/n25/mode/2up.
63. Cleveland, *Great Revival*, 97–98.
64. Letter by Reverend Thomas Moore, Ten Mile, PA, 9 March 1803, printed in

spiritual exercises that included jerks, barking, and dancing. Still others broke out into beautiful heart-felt singing.[65] This mix of enthusiastic responses must have been confusing to old-school mainstream Christians and offensive to Deists and those who leaned toward logic and reason.

In response to Asael and Jesse's rebuke of Methodism, Lucy went alone to a secluded stand of beautiful wild cherry trees and prayed fervently for her husband "to receive the gospel whenever it was preached [to him]." That night she had a dream about the religious differences between her husband and his brother Jesse. Her interpretation of the dream comforted her. She learned that while Jesse was "stubborn and unyielding," Joseph Sr. was "more pliant and flexible." Jesse would resist the "breath of heaven, the pure and undefiled Gospel of the Son of God . . . which Joseph [Sr.], when he was more advanced in life, would hear and receive with his whole heart."[66] Her prophetic dream drove her hope that she and Joseph Sr. would find a church acceptable to them both.

Hints from Lucy's dream point to Jesse, who was noted for his strict orthodoxy, as perhaps initiating the flare-up between Asael and Joseph Sr. Were father and oldest son mocking Methodist revival conversion techniques and the participants' outward responses? Was it their sarcastic response to what they considered superstitions masked as conversion? Had Asael actually read Thomas Paine's tract or was he basing his opinion on Paine's Revolutionary War stature? Was Asael playing "devil's advocate" to show Joseph Sr. how far Methodist enthusiasm was from reason? Perhaps Asael's actions were meant to startle his son into a deep reconsideration of Methodist ideas of conversion and Christian perfection[67] and a belief system that was in stark contrast to reason and Universalist ideas of salvation.

The Family's Reaction to the Restoration through Joseph Smith Jr.

In 1828, about seventeen years after his own first prophetic dream, Joseph Sr. wrote his family and shared some of his son, Joseph Jr.'s,

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the Massachusetts Missionary Magazine 1 (1803): 198–99, as cited in Cleveland, *Great Revival*, 95.

65. Cleveland, *Great Revival*, 98–103.
66. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 291–94.
67. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 25.

"remarkable visions."[68] Initially, Joseph Sr.'s brothers mocked the claims to visions, but Asael defended his grandson. One memory asserts that Asael declared "he always knew that God was going to raise up some branch of his family to be a great benefit to mankind . . . something would turn up in his family that would revolutionize the world."[69] Jesse particularly was skeptical of the claim to revelation and "sought to shield his father from news of the revelations," calling them a "tale of nonsense."[70]

Just prior to Asael's death in 1830, Joseph Sr. visited his father and introduced him to the Book of Mormon. Jesse was angry and called it blasphemous. The other brothers, however, cautiously weighed the new message. According to the account of Joseph Sr.'s brother, John, Asael warmly responded to the book and "remarked that he had always expected that something would appear to make known the true gospel."[71] George A. Smith, Joseph Smith Jr.'s first cousin, declared that Asael, "fully believed the Book of Mormon" and died "confident that a new religious age was upon the world."[72]

As evident from his spiritual will, Asael was an independent thinker. Although very liberal in his views, and encouraging the same open-mindedness in his children, he was sure in his testimony of the Savior. Conceivably, he wanted to provoke his son, Joseph Sr., to consider reason as well as faith — head and heart — if he were to join a church. Methodism did not fit Asael's idea of a reasoned religion. Asael's theological heterodoxy, especially his belief in certain Universal tenets, could be criticized, but not his Christian testimony.[73] Having considered the religious propensities of the family members, we can come to no definitive conclusion as to why Asael's passionate outburst to Lucy and Joseph Sr. included the promotion of Paine's *The Age of Reason;* we can only speculate.

Summary and Conclusion

Interestingly, Asael's later conversion to his grandson's visionary connections repudiates his acceptance of Paine's foundational skeptical philosophy. Paine was anti-Christ, but Asael always had a firm

68. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 111.
69. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 112.
70. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 112.
71. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 112.
72. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 113.
73. Anderson, *New England Heritage*, 105, 107, 206n182.

testimony of the Savior. In contrast, Paine's "religion" was science. Specifically, he thought astronomy was valuable because it served as material evidence of God's creative force. As one biblical scholar notes, although astronomy is certainly "an honorable and necessary pursuit," it has spiritual limits.[74] Without revelation, the mysteries of God are withheld. Asael's grandson, Joseph Smith Jr., would later declare why this is so: "because the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out."[75] Apparently, Asael was able to reconcile his head and heart, reason and revelation, to embrace the beginning of the latter-day restoration of all things, as revealed to his grandson. Thomas Paine's opposition to Christianity, visions, revelation, and scripture had no impact on the Smith family: not Asael, nor Joseph Sr. and Lucy, and certainly not Joseph Jr.

Appendix: Calvinistic Teachings

The five "petals" of Calvin-minded reformers were represented by the acronym *TULIP*:

- The *total depravity of man* was a result of the Fall. Adam and Eve, representing all humankind, corrupted the souls of all their posterity through their sin, called by Augustine *original sin.* This rendered each person unable "to turn to God, or to do anything truly good, and exposes it to his righteous displeasure, both in this world and that which is to come."
- *Unconditional election* referred to God's decision, made before the creation of the world, to choose certain members, a select number of elect individuals from Adam's fallen posterity, for eternal glory according to his own purposes. Election took place "without the least foresight of faith, good works, or any conditions performed by the creature." By his divine justice he could ignore the rest of humankind and consign them to dishonor and wrath for their sins.
- *Limited atonement* implies that Christ's Atonement is

74. Robert J. Matthews, *Selected Writings of Robert J. Matthews* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 417.

75. Joseph Smith, "Letter from Liberty Jail, 25 March 1839," *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), 3:295.

efficacious only for those whom God predestined or elected to be saved. Although Calvinists recognized that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, they believed it was the will of God that his Atonement redeem only those who had been chosen.

- *Irresistible grace* refers to a person's inability to respond to the call to salvation, excepting those individuals selected by Christ. In other words, Calvinists believed that all who have been elected will be sought out and found by God in his own time. Even if an individual comes to Christ and is converted, he cannot ascribe it to his own free will, but to God, who is the only one capable of regeneration and salvation.
- *Perseverance of the Saints* means that once saved, an individual is guaranteed eternal life, and that those whom God elected to salvation can never completely fall from a state of grace. While one might fall partially, the mercy and faithfulness of God also gives the grace of perseverance to those he elected.[76]



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76. Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary* (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1844), s.v. "Calvinists," archive.org/details/theologicaldicti0000char/page/70/mode/2up; see also E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 11.

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