Analysis of Noah Webster’s “Advice to the Young”

Noah Webster, brother to the famous Massachusetts’ statesman Daniel Webster, was a patriot and scholar who spent many years of his life as an educator, lawyer, and political orator as well as dabbling in a few different areas of interest along the way. Webster lived from 1758 to 1843 and is most famously known for his work concerning the 1806 edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* that still bears his name today. In the eyes of Webster, the “most important undertaking” of his life was his 1833 revision of the King James Bible in which he sought to ensure its grammatical and geographical accuracy as well as updating its archaisms. He desired to make the Bible the most accessible book to the American home. As a companion piece to his edition of the Bible, Webster published *Value of the Bible and Excellence of the Christian Religion*. Using a short selection from this work, “Advice to the Young”, I undertake the task of interpreting and analyzing some key facets of Biblical principle that Webster initiates as well as comparing it to the modern-day *Prayer of Repentance* by Reverend Joe Wright of Kansas. In the comparison of these two literary works I humbly attempt to assert how well our nation is doing at following the principles outlined by the Word of God, which in essence is the foundation of those principles taught by Webster.¹

¹ Historical Background taken from *Our Sacred Honor* –edited by William J. Bennett
Webster first addresses the exercise of suffrage in which he reminds his young readers that “God commands [electors] to choose for rulers, just men who will rule in the fear of God.” Webster understands the significance of choosing men of God to faithfully execute the office of leadership in the most influential of American institutions, that of the republican government. He argues that for those voting to do anything less than appointing God-fearing men to this service would be a “neglect of their duty” and would result in establishing a leadership body of “unprincipled men”, which would eventually lead to the downfall of the American Government. He suggests that leadership by “unprincipled men” would only bring about a corrupted government who makes laws for “selfish or local purposes.” He foresees that “public revenues will be squandered by unworthy men; and the rights of citizens will be violated or disregarded.” Webster is never more correct than when he suggests that a government failure to “secure public prosperity and happiness” can only be the fault of the citizens of that government who “neglect the divine commands, and elect bad men to make and administer laws.”

In Webster’s day it was customary, for understanding matters of the human heart and the character of men, to turn to the writings of Shakespeare and authors much like him who were dramatized in other forms of literary. Webster urges the readers to take note that, “Whatever amusement may be derived from such writing, they are not the best authorities for a knowledge of mankind.” He then goes on to suggest that the “most perfect maxims and examples of regulating your social conduct and domestic economy, as well as the best rules of morality and religion, are to be found in the Bible.” In this short statement of faith, he makes a bold assertion by claiming that the Bible is the utmost authority on such issues as the human heart and the knowledge of mankind.
Webster uses the “history of the Jews” as an example of the “true character of man in all its forms. All the traits of human character, good and bad; all the passions of the human heart; all the principles which guide and misguide men in society, are depicted in that short history, with an artless simplicity that has no parallel in modern writings.” He explains how the issues that evidence the character of man and all the passions that reside in the human heart have never been described in a more simplistic, unparalleled source than in the Bible. Not only this, but he asserts the sufficiency of the Scriptures when he states the claim that “the Proverbs of Solomon furnish a complete system” of wisdom and prudence, that “if carefully observed” can make “any man wise, prosperous, and happy.” He quotes Solomon in saying, “a soft answer turneth away wrath” as being, if strictly observed by men, “would prevent half the broils and contentions that inflict wretchedness on society and families.” This simple selection is merely one demonstration to the sufficiency of the Proverbs of Solomon, as well as to the nature of the sufficiency of the Scriptures (II Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12-13).

If we knew for certain that there would be no future life after this one on earth and that the only thing to come is for us to perish like the “beasts of the field,” then “the moral principles and precepts contained in the [S]criptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws.” Webster once again makes the claim that the “principles and precepts” have “immutable truth for their foundation” and he highlights once again the sufficiency of Scripture by stating that “they are adapted to the wants of man in every condition of life.” His observation and analysis of the human need and dependence on the Bible is such that he would suggest it as the only viable answer to “secure the practice of universal justice and kindness among men.” Having such an universal law of absolute precepts would by in and of itself prevent, if followed strictly, the course of war, crime and other forms of bigotry within society.
His faith in the supremacy and sufficiency of the gospel leads him to conclude, “No human laws dictated by different principles from those in the gospel, can ever secure these objects.” The miserable state in which most of society finds itself cornered with primarily proceeds from the “despising or neglecting of the precepts contained in the Bible.”

The paradox of the Christian religion is such that it teaches the “equality of men as to rights and duties; and while it forbids all oppression, it commands due subordination to law and rulers.” The command for submission to earthly law and authority is a not only a form of obedience to the command by God, but are a mere reflection of the manner in which God has called his children into submission. The law of God firmly establishes the Christian religion as a basis of authority and yields the best example to be imitated by earthly authority. “The [Christian religion] is the real source of all genuine republican principles.” He criticizes the forms of “ecclesiastical establishments of Europe”, which he claims “serve to support tyrannical governments, are not Christian religion, but abuses and corruptions of it.” Many forms of government put on a façade as some sort of religious institution, but resort to serving ulterior motives that stem from everything but the true religion, that of Jesus Christ. Webster states “the religion of Christ and his apostles, in its primitive simplicity and purity, unencumbered with the trappings of power and the pomp of ceremonies, is the surest basis of a republican government.”

Webster calls for continuous support of the institutions and ministers of religion. He advises the young to care for and ensure the future influence of these men by supporting them financially and spiritually. He stresses the important role of the clergy in the American Revolution by reminding the readers that “[they] were generally friendly to the cause of the country. The present generation,” he writes, “can hardly have a tolerable idea of the influence of the New-England clergy, in sustaining the patriotic exertions of the people, under the appalling
discouragements of the war.” He highlights a few of the roles of the clergy as “firm supporters of law and good order, the friends of peace, the expounders and teachers of Christian doctrines, the instructors of youth, the promoters of benevolence, of Charity, and of all useful improvements.” This call for the remembrance of the men of God, who so adamantly supported the country in a time of crises, was a primary way in which Webster sought to relay to his young readers the importance of services rendered by the clergy. He did so in hopes that they might not lose that ideal in generations to come. He argues that any such man “who would attempt to impair the influence of that respectable order, in this country, attempt to undermine the best supports of religion; and those who destroy the influence and authority of the [C]hristian religion, sap the foundations of public order, of liberty, and of republican government.”

Webster once again stresses the supremacy of the Scriptures when he writes, “For the instruction then in social, religious, and civil duties, resort to the [S]criptures for the best precepts and most excellent examples for imitation.” He is giving the young a simple, yet profound source of wisdom concerning all facets of life. He recommended a book so complex that it confuses the knowledge of the wise and yet is so simple that little children can comprehend its teaching. He mentions a few examples of men of God such as Abraham, Joseph, Christ, and the apostles as examples for us to imitate. He ends by saying, “If men would universally cultivate these religious affections and virtuous dispositions, with as much diligence as they cultivate human science and refinement of manners, the world would soon become a terrestrial paradise.”

Webster has many profound ideas of life and conduct that take root from the basis of the Bible itself. His writing makes it clear that true religion and happiness cannot take place aside from the Bible, and that it is our duty as beings created by God to submit to his authority. Our
very lives should be forms of worship to that Supreme Authority which resides in heaven. Any institution of authority that we attempt to base aside from that Supreme Authority and all that He has commanded is merely a divorce of any hope for effective government or institution of order.

When invited as an honorary guest chaplain to the Kansas House of Representatives in Topeka, Kansas on January 23, 1996, Reverend Joe Wright of the Central Christian Church in Wichita, Kansas delivered the following prayer. In this prayer, Wright assesses how well the United States, as a nation, has obeyed the commands of God. As Webster pointed out, the underlying fundamentals of the republican government rest on the basis of obedience to the commands of the law of the Lord. Passionately and boldly Reverend Wright prayed in the opening session of the 1996 Kansas Legislature:

“Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and seek your direction and guidance. We know your Word says, "Woe to those who call evil good," but that's exactly what we've done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values. We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your Word and called it moral pluralism. We have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism. We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle. We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable. We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building esteem. We have abused power and called it political savvy.

We have coveted our neighbors' possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment. Search us O God and know our hearts today; try us and see if there be some wicked way in us; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of Kansas, and who have been ordained by you, to govern this great state. Grant them your wisdom to rule and may their decisions direct us to the center of your will. I ask it in the name of your son, the living savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

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Upon hearing the prayer, many representatives walked out of the assembly room outraged, however no modern-day prayer has stimulated such strong response from the public. In just six short weeks, Reverend Wright’s church, Central Christian Church, received more than 5,000 phone calls with only 47 of them being negative. His church has received international requests for copies of his prayer from nations including India, Africa, and Korea. The Commentator Paul Harvey aired Wright’s prayer on “The Rest of the Story” and too much astonishment received a larger public response from this program than any other he has aired before or since.³

Wright’s assessment on the nature of obedience to God resembled by the United States of America could not be more truthful and at the same time convicting. The soul-stirring prayer that he spoke so passionately to the Lord was one of personal reflection and public outcry. He was pleading with God to turn the hearts of the American people back to Him. His prayer indicates that the people of this nation have strayed from the very foundation that our country was based upon. This nation has, generation by generation, been chipping away at the core principles of our governmental institution by removing the presence of God from our hearts, minds, and lives. The American people have sought, any and all, other means of replacing the previous foundation. Instead of building upon what the forefathers of this nation put their faith in, new forms of worship or belief have been grasped hold of in exchange for the simple Truth that is the only hope of keeping America as the “home of the brave and the land of the free.”

After reading intently the writings of both Webster and Wright, I have come to the conclusion that their stance on the need for God in America is never more true than today. Webster gave advice for the foundation of effective government and advised the young to seek out the Scriptures for precepts and principles of wisdom, knowledge and understanding of man and the human heart, as well as examples of character from men and women worth imitating.

³Information regarding the response to Prayer of Repentance- http://www.inspiration4today.com/ksprayer.htm
Webster cites the Bible as the sole foundation for instruction for every condition of life known to man, and therefore deems it sufficient and supreme. Wright gives the advice for the repentance of an ineffective, unprincipled government. Any government based on anything less than the will of God and that which he has commanded is an ineffective, unprincipled government. Wright gives a vast number of examples, in his prayer, citing the many ways this nation has strayed from those principles that God had ordained for all men to live by. He cites the “politically correct” terms that we, as a nation, have used to justify our sinfulness. It is my sincere hope and prayer that we may someday return to being a nation after God’s own heart. May our passions be reflected through our obedience to the Supreme Authority. Until then, we cannot begin to comprehend the ramifications of doing otherwise. Our nation was built upon the Divine foundation of the Rock (Matthew 7:24-27) and has through disobedience been exchanging that foundation for sand. From my careful study of the Scriptures and humble study of the writings of Webster and Wright, I do hereby conclude that both of these gentlemen have accurately and truthfully exposed the need of the United States, or any nation for that matter, to hold firmly to the Gospel for any hopes of free and effective government. For if we remain tolerant of such disobedience to the Word of God, then we shall cease to be blessed (Psalm 33:12); and likewise to exist. As Webster reminded the young, it all begins with our “duty” to elect “men [and women] who rule in the fear of the Lord.”