Lesson Guide
Lesson 10 – The American Experiment: Stepping Stones

Introduction
For this tour we will remain in the southwest sector of the compass long enough to examine a special sub-category of our last topic of discussion: the design of the state. In particular, we want to take a brief look at the question, “What should God’s minister on earth (Romans 13:4) look like? What is a proper form for this agency that is divinely appointed and commissioned to administer justice, punish evil, and encourage goodness among its citizens or subjects?” We will approach this task by considering the American Experiment.

Themes
From the beginning, Dr. Tackett lays down three ground rules for this study: first, we will not seek to deify America; and second, we will not seek to deify the Founding Fathers (the third ground rule will be dealt with at the end of the lesson). Having established these guidelines, he hastens to point out that there are compelling reasons for giving special attention to the subject of this tour. The American Experiment has the potential to prove unusually conducive to a deeper understanding of God’s design for the state precisely because it is unique in the history of the world. Here on these shores, and here alone, people with a strong Christian worldview have been afforded an unparalleled opportunity to create from scratch what they considered an ideal system of government – a system designed in careful conformity with the principles outlined in Lesson 9.

We begin by establishing the biblical character of that worldview. The New England Primer, the second best-selling book (after the Bible) of the colonial era, provides an intriguing window into the attitudes of early Americans. In particular, it reveals an outlook and a way of life powerfully shaped by the teachings of Scripture. The pervasiveness of this outlook is further demonstrated in statements made by America’s early political leaders, legal and social architects, and educational pioneers – people like Benjamin Rush, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, Charles Carroll, Noah Webster, and the founders of Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia Universities. In spite of the fact that not all of them were practicing Christians, these luminaries agreed with President John Adams that the success of America’s republican form of government would prove directly dependent upon the virtue and morality of her people, and that virtue and morality are necessarily founded upon religion – by which all meant the Christian religion. All of these early thinkers were convinced that the state must be held accountable to the authority of a higher ethical and spiritual standard – the “Natural Law” or the “Law of Nature’s God” – if the human rights abuses they had observed in Europe and throughout history were to be hopefully avoided on this continent.

Tragically, however, America is quickly turning away from these principles. It is hard to put a finger on the exact reasons, but one clear element came as Darwinian evolutionary theory made its influence felt in the field of law. In 1869, Harvard Law School Dean Christopher Langdell
advanced the view that law is not based upon the transcendent standard of “Nature’s God,” but is rather a fluid and constantly mutating body of “doctrine,” a set of purely human ideas that inevitably change “by slow degrees.” In other words, law and ethics, like biological species, are continually “evolving.” Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes expanded on this theme by declaring that the law is “simply an embodiment of the ends and purposes of a society at a given point in its history,” thus effectively granting to the state the power to establish society’s ethical norms. John Dewey implemented these ideas in the realm of public education. “There is no God,” said Dewey (nicknamed “The Architect of Modern Education”), “and there is no soul. Hence, there are no needs for the props of traditional religion.”

These statements, says Dr. Tackett, bring us to the present moment. Today, America has largely forgotten God and denied the validity of her biblically based Christian roots. As a result, we see the power of the state expanding in our time. This, too, is a manifestation of the perennial Cosmic Battle, which is always fought most fiercely in the social realm. Ultimately, we must face the fact that the American Experiment is likely to fail altogether if we do not take intentional and deliberate steps to salvage it. This is a task which falls primarily on the shoulders of Christian people. As believers, we need to remember God’s call to prayer and repentance in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. There is nothing to be gained, says Dr. Tackett, by casting blame on non-Christians (this is the third ground rule for our study).

**Points to Watch For**

This last point should be kept in mind throughout the entire discussion. From beginning to end, Dr. Tackett seeks to communicate the thought that the American Experiment makes sense only when understood as the brainchild of Christians who operated on the basis of a biblical worldview. Just as the experiment was instigated by believers, so it must be carried on by believers – believers who care deeply and passionately about their country – if it is to survive and continue to succeed.

**Discussion Questions**

1) **What did you see on this tour? Which of these were particularly striking to you?**
   **Why?**

2) **It was during a re-enactment of Washington’s Farewell Address, says Dr. Tackett, that he was struck by the “sinking feeling” that he had been “lied to.” What “lies” does he have in mind, and how do they fit the pattern of the other lies we’ve encountered during the course of our worldview tours?** Have you been subjected to such lies yourself?

3) **Name some of the early sources for the idea of “the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” referenced by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.** Why was this concept so important to the founders of the American system of government? **What risks do we run in replacing this idea with Langdell’s notion of “evolving law?”**
4) What did John Adams mean when he affirmed that “… Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other”? What does this imply about the foundations of the American Experiment and the basic structure of the system of government it established?

5) Why, according to Dr. Tackett, is it in vogue to hate America today? To what extent is this hatred justifiable, and to what extent is it a manifestation of the Cosmic Battle?

6) What should we do when Adams’s assumptions no longer appear to be valid – that is, when it becomes evident that Americans can no longer be characterized as a “moral and religious people” as he understood the phrase? How do we apply the Founders’ ideas to a “multicultural” America where a flood of moral and spiritual perspectives – e.g., Buddhism, spiritism, Islam, Native American religions, and Wicca – have become part of the cultural fabric?