

THE MAGNA CARTA:

800 Years of Modern Liberty

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Christians understand that every person is a sinner. In the eyes of God,
*“There is none righteous, no, not one.
...there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (Rom 3:10,12).

When sinners have the power to rule over others, there necessarily needs to be controls on rulers due to their fallen natures. Modern humanists do not understand this. They deny the biblical doctrine of sin and mistakenly believe in the perfectibility of mankind. The flawed exercise of their age-old lust for power to improve the world through top-down control only underscores the English political maxim that, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

In England 800 years ago there was a bad king, King John, made memorable to us in the tale of Robin Hood. Bad King John not only was abusing his subjects through ruthless tax collection, but he was bullying his lords and barons. They were tired of King John demanding more and more money for a losing war in France, so in 1215 they banded together to gain concessions from their king.

The barons of England had an ally in the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. Langton knew his Bible well—so well, that he thoughtfully inserted the first chapter divisions into the Bible. Archbishop Langton also knew that the kings of the Bible, like King Saul, could not do whatever they wanted, but were held accountable before God—king and subject alike must answer to God. Stephen Langton agreed to help the barons by writing the Magna Carta for King John to sign. Because King John needed the support of his nobility to ward off French attacks, he signed the Magna Carta at Runnymede on June 19, 1215.



King John signs in the presence of the barons and the Archbishop

Even though King John would break the promises to which he agreed in signing this document, copies of the “Great Charter” immediately were distributed and popularized in England because it was the first time that an English king promised rights and protections to his subjects. The Magna Carta also placed the king under the law instead of above it. This was an initial stroke against the notion of the “divine right of kings,” asserting

rather that “the law is king”—not the other way around. For this reason, many view the Magna Carta as the beginning of constitutional governance in western Christendom. Indeed, the “Great Council” of lords and churchmen that forced King John to make concessions in 1215 soon evolved into an early English Parliament.

King John was not happy with the Magna Carta, nor was the pope. Even though Pope Innocent III did not like King John and had tried to depose him two years earlier, the pope was against this democratic development that began to divest absolute power from the crown and to spread a measure of civil rule to the barons of England. The pope believed it was easier to control countries from Rome if he had to manipulate only the monarch instead of a representative body.

Thankfully, Christian Englishmen have always viewed the Magna Carta as their touchstone of religious and political freedom. The English Bill of Rights (1689) as well as the American Bill of Rights (1789) find their source in the principles of the Magna Carta. The liberating gospel believed by Archbishop Langton in 1215 helped to shape the Magna Carta, and the Magna Carta has helped shape the modern world.

The next time you hear of someone overseas being thrown into prison without charges or without a public trial, thank God for the Magna Carta! The next time you watch a courtroom scene or even serve on a jury, thank God that the Magna Carta secured the right of trial by a jury of one’s peers. And the next time you hear the gospel proclaimed, thank God that your freedoms ultimately are rooted in the liberty guaranteed to believers by adoption into the family of God through Christ’s work!

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.
For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear,
but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.”
The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,
if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:14-17,21).



Early copy of the Magna Carta