

Taking it to the Streets:
Engaging Bad History in Public
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Abstract

David Barton is a popular Christian writer who specializes in making a public case that America is a Christian nation. Immensely popular with conservative Christians, Barton distorts historical events to support conservative political positions in the present day. Up until recently, left-leaning and progressive critics have led the way in calling out Barton's historical errors in the public square.

However, in 2012, David Barton published a book on Thomas Jefferson that generated much public reaction, most of it critical, from Christian scholars. Along with co-author Michael Coulter, I published a book length critique of Barton's work on Jefferson. Eventually, publisher Thomas Nelson listened to the critics and pulled Barton's book from publication.

This episode was unprecedented in that a Christian publisher pulled a New York Times bestselling book due to vocal public complaints from Christian scholars. What can be learned from this situation?

I take the position that Christian historians and other scholars should engage their brethren in critical scholarship when other avenues have not brought resolution. Myth-busting in this situation can serve the Kingdom and our vocation by placing a quest for truth above narrow in group interests. In group pressures are often so strong that no real change will occur if those within the Christian community do not raise issues publicly.

Through several circumstances, including an interest in how the First Amendment applied to the practice of counseling and psychology, I discovered David Barton's materials in 2011. That you are attending this session means I don't have to explain who Barton is or why he is important. I wrote my first blog post on Barton in April, 2011 on David Barton's claim that Thomas Jefferson cut up the Gospels just to make an evangelism tool for Native Americans.¹ From there, my fascination with historical revisionism led to many more blog posts and a book written with Grove City College colleague Michael Coulter.

The book, *Getting Jefferson Right: Fact Checking Claims About Our Third President*, led to a most extraordinary ride. To write the book, I secured a pre-publication copy of David Barton's 2012 book *The Jefferson Lies* and read it carefully. Initially, my plan was to combine and update some of my blog posts on Barton's handling of claims regarding Jefferson. However, when I saw how factually flawed the book was, I felt a full length response was necessary. I then recruited friend and political science professor Michael Coulter to help out and soon we had our response, first published as an ebook on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. I eventually published it in paperback via Amazon's print on demand service.

After *Getting Jefferson Right* was published, Discovery Institute fellow Jay Richards bought it, and after letting me know that he liked it, informed me that he asked ten Christian historians to read Barton's book alongside ours and render a verdict about who was correct.

After the historians read both books, they provided feedback to Richards. The feedback was consistent – Barton had stretched the truth, used partial quotes, told half-truths and generally failed to be faithful to the historical record. In contrast, we had the facts and were generally on target with our critique.

As I was hammering away at *The Jefferson Lies* on my blog, apparently voices were being lifted at Thomas Nelson that Barton's book was fact-challenged. We learned later that Thomas Nelson had a copy of our book and had begun a process of recruiting various readers to read both books and advise the publisher. However, at some point prior to August 9, 2012, Thomas Nelson decided to pull the book from their website and from publication. Once this fact was discovered, the news spread: first via Tommy Kidd writing at *World* and then by Bob Smietana at the *Tennessean*. After that, word spread rapidly that Thomas Nelson had done an amazing thing.

I was prepared for a negative reaction from Barton, but I was a little surprised at how venomous it was. I suppose the strength of the reaction is why some scholars don't want to produce work which takes on error in the public arena. We were dismissed by Barton and his staff as godless ivory tower professors, and compared to Hitler and Saul Alinsky.

David Barton appeared on American Family Radio's Focal Point Show hosted by Bryan Fischer. Barton focused on me and told Fischer that information was emerging that would prove that I was not a conservative and was motivated by political opposition to Barton. That appearance set the tone for the next several weeks. Barton's defense was to mount an unfair and generally inaccurate offensive against Coulter and me. However, the deed had been done. Most times when you read about David Barton in anything approaching an objective news report, you will read that Thomas Nelson pulled his book from publication.

There were a few brave Christian writers who came along and jumped in once it appeared safe. For instance, Tom Gilson, in a column titled "He Gave Us What We Wanted," and

published at Breakpoint, a ministry started by Chuck Colson, lamented the false history that had been accepted for too long.² Gilson wrote:

David Barton was American evangelicals' favorite historian. He taught us about the Founding Fathers' almost uniform commitment to Christian principles, and secular historians' attempts to bury our Christian heritage under reams of revisionist distortions. He gave us firepower in support of our mission to return America to its godly founding principles.

He gave us what we wanted. But now David Barton has been credibly charged with serious distortions of his own.

Gilson seemed pensive in his acceptance of Barton's fall. He clearly recognized that Barton provided religious right culture warriors with a useable history. Now that historical narrative was in question.

Gilson continued:

I am no historian, so I am in no position to form an independent judgment of his veracity. Few of us are. But that doesn't excuse our eager acceptance of his inaccuracies. With a bit of care, any of us could have known of the serious questions that have surrounded Barton's work for a long time. These recent revelations are nothing new, except in the degree to which conservative Christian scholars are involved in calling him to account.

Nevertheless we became for him a devoted cadre of disciples. We knew our country's founding principles were vitally important. However, so is historical accuracy. It looks as if Barton compromised one to make a case for the other.

If the signs have been there for some time, why then did we love Barton so? And is it possible that we share the blame?

Gilson's analysis is simple and yet cuts to the heart of why the vocation of the historian matters in the church. Gilson, speaking for his fellow Christian culture warriors, admitted that he was aware of the secular critiques of Barton's work. A little internet searching and a question or two to professors at most Christian colleges would have verified the academy's critiques. Gilson moves to implicate the willing and gullible audience. He continued:

The story has been told in both the secular and the Christian press: Barton's most recent book, *The Jefferson Lies*, was riddled with misinformation. Its publisher, Thomas Nelson, pulled it from distribution. Barton is standing firm in his position, but reliable historians—strongly conservative Christian scholars among them—continue to hold him in error, and not just because of this work but because of others as well.

The work of Christian scholars mattered. Jay Richards recruited Christian scholars; Tommy Kidd was a Christian scholar writing in *World* who cited more Christian scholars. John Fea, John Wilsey, and Gregg Frazer had been writing pointedly about Barton's errors, and then even though we are not historians, Coulter and I had a solid basis at a Christian school.

Christian advocacy groups can't completely shout down or ignore the loud persistent voice of Christian scholars who speak truth in the public square. Even at risk of bringing the internecine conflict to public attention, Christian scholars can make a difference with clear calls for accuracy in materials and presentations claiming to represent the Author of truth.

Post Barton Efforts

In the summer of 2013, I asked numerous Christian historians to evaluate David Barton's Capitol tour which the Family Research Council posted to You Tube. About 40 colleagues signed on to a letter which went to Ken Cureton, V.P. at FRC asking the organization to remove the error-filled video. Cureton informed me that through the efforts of Jay Richards several months before our letter, FRC had already met with Barton who promised to supply edited video footage with corrections. However, nothing had materialized from Barton. After two letters from the group of historians, FRC made the video private on You Tube.³

Next, we went to work on Focus on the Family. That organization posted an audio broadcast of a Barton speech filled with errors. A slightly smaller group of historians approached Focus on the Family to request that they remove the erroneous content from their site.

The response of Focus on the Family still baffles me. Instead of removing the content, the editors at Focus removed two clearly false stories, one involved a PA Supreme Court decision Barton had twisted, and the other was the fiction about Congress printing the first English language Bible in America. However, when asked by a Politico reporter about the deletions, Carrie Earll denied that Focus had edited the materials.

It seems uncanny that a Christian organization would go to the extreme of deception in order to protect David Barton from honest scrutiny. However, as Politico's Stephanie Simon reported in September 2013, that is exactly what Focus did. Simon wrote:

Focus on the Family, meanwhile, edited two videos on its website featuring a lengthy interview Barton gave to Focus radio. The editing deleted a segment in which Barton declares that Congress printed the first English-language Bible in America — and

intended it to be used in schools. That's one of Barton's signature stories — it's a highlight in his Capitol tour — but historians who have reviewed the documentation say it's simply not true. Focus also cut an inaccurate anecdote about a contemporary legal case, which Barton cited to make the point that society today punishes people of faith.

Asked why the videos were edited, Carrie Gordon Earll, a senior director of public policy at Focus on the Family, at first said they had not been, though before-and-after footage can be publicly viewed on websites archiving Focus broadcasts. Earll then said she could not comment beyond a statement noting that Focus “has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with David Barton” and respects his “broad base of knowledge” about early American history.⁴

Recent events have shown these gains such as they are to be passing. FRC has recently retained Barton to lead the Capitol tour again. Barton continues to be invited to speak at religious right and conservative functions. And his influence on the Texas history curriculum standards is back in the news because the new history textbooks are now the subject of public hearings.⁵

Conclusions and Parting Thoughts

The emergence of controversy again over the Texas history standards and derivative textbooks will again focus public attention on religious right advocacy history. The debate over historical accuracy will not be about facts and context but rather about loyalty to a politicized religious ideology. Christian historians surely have something better to offer here.

I believe Christian historians have much to offer their Christian brothers and sisters struggling over the achievement of a useable history. I hope Christian historians will organize a bit to take on the advocacy history machine of David Barton and those like him. The upcoming

debates over the Texas textbooks could offer Christian historians an opportunity to independently evaluate the texts and offer recommendations to Texas Christians and the watching church. If Christian scholars get involved then the debate can't easily be framed as Christians on one side and secularists on the other.

David Barton and others who manipulate history for political purposes should not go unchallenged by Christian historians. . Myth-busting in this situation can serve the Kingdom and our vocation by placing a quest for truth above narrow in-group interests. In-group pressures are often so strong that no real change will occur if those within the Christian community do not raise issues publicly. Thus, I call Christian historians and interested scholars to take their scholarship to the streets.

¹ Thanks to Grove City College history professor Gary Scott Smith for his helpful comments on that post.

² Tom Gilson, He Gave Us What We Wanted, August 21, 2012, and retrieved from <http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/breakpoint-columns/entry/2/20123> on September 15, 2012.

³ Warren Throckmorton, Citing Historical Errors,. FRC Leaders Removes David Barton's Capitol Tour Video From You Tube, personal blog, retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/warrenthrockmorton/2013/05/07/citing-historical-errors-frc-removes-david-bartons-capitol-tour-video/> on September 19, 2012.

⁴ Stephanie Simon, Evangelical Historian Remains Key Ally of Right, September 8, 2013, Politico, retrieved September 19, 2014 from http://www.politico.com/story/2013/09/david-barton-historian-right-christian-96443_Page2.html.

⁵ Edward Countryman, In Texas Textbooks, Moses is a Founding Father, Daily Beast, September 22, 2014, retrieved on September 22, 2014 from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/22/in-texas-textbooks-moses-is-a-founding-father.html>.