

John Adams on Education, Liberty, and the Formation of a Republic

A Companion Brief from Truth & Transformation USA

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John Adams stands among the most influential political thinkers of the American founding, articulating a vision of education inseparable from the preservation of liberty and the formation of moral character. Though not an institutional educator in the same manner as John Witherspoon, Adams wrote extensively on the necessity of education for sustaining a free republic. Across his essays, constitutional contributions, and correspondence, he presents education as a formative enterprise—one that cultivates disciplined reasoning, virtuous judgment, and the capacity for self-government. His reflections reveal a consistent conviction: a republic can endure only if its people are formed in both knowledge and virtue.

Early Formation, Classical Learning, and a Vision of Civic Responsibility

John Adams's educational thought emerged from a formative environment shaped by classical study, Puritan moral seriousness, and legal training in colonial New England. Born in 1735 in Braintree, Massachusetts, Adams was raised in a household that valued literacy, discipline, and religious instruction. His early education emphasized reading, writing, and moral reflection, instilling habits of thought that would shape his later political philosophy.

Adams attended Harvard College, where the curriculum combined classical languages, rhetoric, logic, and moral philosophy. This educational model did not separate intellectual development from moral formation; rather, it assumed that disciplined study cultivated both the mind and the character. Through engagement with classical texts and philosophical reasoning, Adams developed a deep respect for the formative power of education, particularly its role in preparing individuals for public life.

These early experiences informed Adams's lifelong belief that education must extend beyond the acquisition of knowledge to the shaping of judgment. His later writings reflect a continuity between his own formation and his vision for the new nation: a society in which citizens are trained to think carefully, act responsibly, and participate wisely in civic life.

Education as the Foundation of Liberty

At the heart of Adams’s educational thought lies a clear and urgent claim: liberty cannot be sustained without an educated people. In his early political writings, Adams warned that ignorance leaves a population vulnerable to manipulation and tyranny, asserting that the preservation of freedom depends upon the widespread diffusion of knowledge (Adams, 1765).

This conviction shaped his broader political philosophy. For Adams, education equips individuals with the intellectual tools necessary to evaluate arguments, discern truth from falsehood, and resist the distortions of power. Without such formation, the structures of a republic become fragile, as citizens lack the capacity for informed judgment.

His later contributions to the Massachusetts Constitution further reinforce this principle, affirming that

“wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, [are] necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties”
—Adams, 1780

Education, in this vision, is not merely beneficial but essential—serving as the intellectual and moral foundation upon which self-government rests.

The Integration of Knowledge and Virtue

Adams did not view education as a purely intellectual endeavor. Instead, he insisted that knowledge must be joined with virtue if it is to serve the common good. An educated but unprincipled populace, in his view, poses as great a threat to liberty as ignorance.

This integration of knowledge and moral formation reflects the influence of both classical philosophy and Christian moral teaching in Adams’s thought. Education must shape not only what individuals know, but how they judge and act. It must cultivate habits of discipline, self-restraint, and responsibility—qualities necessary for both personal integrity and civic stability.

Adams’s emphasis on virtue aligns with a broader founding-era understanding that freedom requires internal restraint. Citizens must be capable of governing themselves before they can sustain a system of self-government. Education, therefore, functions as a formative process that prepares individuals to exercise liberty wisely.

Education and the Practice of Self-Government

Adams consistently linked education to the practice of self-government, arguing that a republic depends upon citizens capable of thoughtful deliberation and responsible action. This responsibility extends beyond formal institutions to the broader community, as Adams asserted that

“the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people” —Adams, 1785

This statement reflects a distributed vision of educational responsibility. Families, churches, and local institutions all participate in the formation of individuals, contributing to a broader ecology of learning. Education is not confined to the classroom but embedded within the structures of daily life.

In this framework, education prepares individuals not only for private success but for public responsibility. It trains citizens to weigh evidence, consider consequences, and act with prudence—habits essential for sustaining a free society. Without such formation, the mechanisms of republican government cannot function effectively.

The Formation of Judgment

Perhaps Adams’s most significant contribution to educational thought lies in his emphasis on judgment. Education must cultivate the ability to reason carefully, evaluate competing claims, and arrive at sound conclusions. This capacity for judgment serves as the bridge between knowledge and action.

For Adams, judgment is both intellectual and moral. It requires not only the ability to think clearly but also the character to act rightly. Education, therefore, must train both the mind and the conscience, forming individuals capable of discerning truth and exercising responsibility.

This focus on judgment underscores Adams’s broader concern with the sustainability of liberty. A republic depends upon citizens who can think independently, resist manipulation, and act in accordance with principle. Education, rightly understood, prepares individuals for this task.

Conclusion

John Adams's reflections on education reveal a vision grounded in the integration of knowledge, virtue, and civic responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of education for preserving liberty, the importance of moral formation, and the cultivation of disciplined judgment, Adams presents learning as a foundational element of both personal character and public life.

His thought reinforces a central insight of the American founding: a free society depends not merely on institutions or laws, but on the formation of its people. Education serves as the means by which individuals are prepared to exercise freedom responsibly, ensuring that liberty is sustained across generations.

Through his writings and constitutional contributions, Adams offers a compelling model of education as a formative enterprise—one that shapes not only what individuals know, but who they become.

Reference

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Pastor & Educator Application *(Key Takeaways from Adams)*

- Education sustains liberty, not just opportunity.

A free society depends upon citizens who possess both knowledge and the capacity for sound judgment. Teaching must therefore aim beyond academic success toward the formation of individuals capable of responsible self-government.

- Knowledge must be joined to virtue.

Adams consistently warned that knowledge without moral formation undermines the very freedom education is meant to preserve. Instruction should cultivate habits of discipline, integrity, and self-restraint alongside intellectual growth.

- Formation is a shared responsibility.

“The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people” (Adams, 1785). Families, churches, and schools together form a distributed ecology of education, each contributing to the shaping of persons and communities.

- Judgment is the goal of learning.

Education must train individuals to think carefully, weigh evidence, and discern truth from falsehood. The capacity for judgment bridges knowledge and action, preparing students for both personal and civic responsibility.

- Self-government begins with self-discipline.

A republic requires citizens who can govern themselves before they participate in governing others. Education must therefore cultivate habits of thought and character ordered toward responsibility and restraint.

Pastoral Cross-References

(Scriptural Anchors for Adams's Educational Vision)

Education and the Preservation of Truth

- Hosea 4:6 (ESV) — “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...”
- Proverbs 18:15 — “An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.”

Connection: Adams's concern that ignorance threatens liberty reflects the biblical warning that lack of knowledge leads to destruction.

Knowledge Joined with Virtue

- Philippians 1:9–10 — “That your love may abound... with knowledge and all discernment...”
- 2 Peter 1:5–7 — “Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue... and knowledge...”

Connection: Scripture affirms that knowledge must be integrated with moral excellence, aligning with Adams's insistence that education must form character as well as intellect.

Formation of Judgment and Discernment

- Hebrews 5:14 — “Those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice...”
- Proverbs 2:2–5 — “Making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding...”

Connection: Adams's emphasis on judgment reflects the biblical call to train discernment through disciplined engagement with truth.

Self-Government and Moral Responsibility

- Galatians 5:22–23 — The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control.
- Proverbs 25:28 — “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.”

Connection: The stability of both the individual and the community depends upon self-governance, a principle central to Adams's political and educational thought.

Education as Preparation for Civic Life

- Jeremiah 29:7 — “Seek the welfare of the city...”
- 1 Peter 2:13–17 — Live honorably and act responsibly within society.

Connection: Education prepares individuals to contribute to the common good, aligning with Adams's vision of responsible citizenship.

Practical “Next-Step” Applications

(Ways Pastors and Educators Can Apply Adams’s Insights This Week)

1. Teach for judgment, not just recall.
In a lesson or sermon this week, move beyond information delivery by asking: *How should this truth shape decisions?* Help learners practice evaluating and applying what they know.
2. Connect knowledge to responsibility.
Explicitly link learning to action. Whether in a classroom or small group, discuss how knowledge carries moral and civic implications, reinforcing that understanding requires response.
3. Reinforce the role of self-discipline.
Highlight the connection between spiritual formation and self-government. Encourage practices—such as reflection, Scripture meditation, or journaling—that cultivate ordered thinking and self-control.
4. Engage families in the work of formation.
Provide one simple question or prompt that parents can use at home to extend learning beyond the classroom, reinforcing the shared responsibility for education.
5. Model thoughtful deliberation.
Demonstrate how to weigh ideas carefully. In teaching or leadership, slow down decision-making processes and explain how conclusions are reached, showing that judgment is cultivated through practice.
6. Pray for the formation of wisdom.
Include a prayer this week specifically for students, educators, and leaders—that their knowledge would mature into wisdom and their learning would be ordered toward truth and virtue.