Richard J. Barnett was flipping TV channels one weekend a few months ago when a program on a local religious station caught his eye.

The Sacramento resident watched as a young, dark-haired man on his television screen blasted separation of church and state and called for a return to America’s “Christian heritage.”

Barnett, who serves as vice president of the Church-State Council, an organization affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was suspicious. In his job Barnett works with church-state issues every day, and much of what he heard on the television that day just didn’t ring true.

At the end of his presentation, the speaker began hawking copies of a videotape titled, “Foundations of American Government.” Curious, Barnett ordered the tape. What he got was a 12-minute attack on church-state separation that attempts to “prove” that the concept is a myth and that founders like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton really meant for government to reflect “Christian” principles.

The man behind the tape turned out to be David Barton, a fundamentalist activist who makes a living attacking separation of church and state. The video Barnett received is a shorter version of Barton’s one-hour documentary “America’s Godly Heritage.” Both tapes in turn are based on Barton’s 1989 book The Myth of Separation.

Even though the book and videos are riddled with factual errors, half truths and distortions, they have become the weapons of choice for Religious Right activists in their ongoing war against separation of church and state. In recent months, Americans United members from around the country have discovered letters to the editor in their local newspapers repeating Barton’s charges. The videos have aired on public access and religious stations from coast to coast, and crates of the books have been shipped to evangelical churches for distribution.

Several Religious Right groups are promoting the book and videos, including branches of Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition. Last August Barton spoke at a statewide gathering of his Christian Coalition in Texas. Last September he was interviewed by James Dobson of Focus on the Family, a Colorado-based Religious Right group, on Dobson’s daily radio program (heard on nearly 2,000 stations nationwide).

In addition, the Rev. Jerry Falwell has praised Barton’s book from his televised pulpit and ordered hundreds of copies for the Liberty University book store. Boosted by this momentum, the Texas activist has been traveling the country and making personal appearances before church groups, further spreading his anti-separationist ideas.

In Utah, the state branch of the Eagle Forum used Barton’s materials to pitch an anti-separationist argument during a recent unsuccessful effort to water down the strict church-state provisions of the state constitution. According to Utah church-state separation activist Chris Allen, Eagle Forum members sent a 20-page document based on Barton’s book to all members of the Utah legislature and to members of a special Religious Liberty Committee that had been formed to examine the issue.

Another incident that demonstrates the far reach of Barton’s ideas occurred last year in Colorado during the state Republican Party convention. David S. Nelson, state director of the Colorado branch of the Christian Coalition, distributed fliers asserting that “The Separation of Church and State is (1) Not a teaching of the founding fathers; (2) Not an historical teaching; (3) Not a teaching of law (except in recent years); (4) Not a biblical teaching.” This language is lifted word for word from Barton’s tape.

Nelson also repeated inaccurate Barton charges about Thomas Jefferson’s “wall of separation between church and state” phrase. Nelson claimed that Jefferson said the “wall is a one dimensional wall [Barton actually used the term “one
directional"). It keeps the government from running the church but it makes sure that Christian principles will always stay in government.” (In truth, Jefferson said no such thing. See page 10 for a refutation of this myth and other Barton errors.)

An updated 1992 version of the video omits the “one-directional wall” mistake. Barton also corrected some other errors that appear in the original 1990 version. For instance, in the 1990 video, Barton mistakenly claimed that Canada does not give tax exemptions to churches. In fact, Canada follows a system similar to that of the United States.

But the new tape still contains plenty of errors and distortions. And, because numerous copies of the early version remain in circulation, its flawed history keeps popping up around the country. A letter to the editor that appeared in The Ann Arbor News on Jan. 24 is typical of many that have given Barton’s distorted views wide circulation. Headlined “First Amendment doesn’t separate church, state,” the letter by Leanne Wade recycles several of Barton’s charges using language taken directly from the 1990 videotape, including the “one-directional” wall myth. Unfortunately, no one at the Michigan newspaper bothered to check the letter’s accuracy before printing it.

According to Barnett of the Church-State Council, Barton’s video has been aired on TV stations and appeared in churches in the Western states he monitors. “It’s very subtle,” Barnett told Church & State. “The person who is not up on what occurred in American history can be very easily deceived.”

Barnett said several Religious Right organizations are distributing the video, primarily D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries and the Christian Coalition. “They all tout the same tune regarding the intent of the founders and their religious beliefs,” Barnett said. “They overlook a lot of the facts.”

Pauline MacPherson, a Denver religious liberty activist, told Church & State that five people mailed her copies of the early version of Barton’s videotape after she wrote an article defending separation of church and state in a newsletter she publishes with her husband Robert.

MacPherson said the tape is a big hit with Colorado’s active Religious Right. “They’re selling it at all of the meetings, like Dobson’s group and the Christian Coalition,” she told Church & State. “Many people are buying multiple copies. People will buy them and give them to the churches, where it is used right alongside the Bible.”

Barton also has ties to extremist elements. In his literature, Christian Reconstructionist authors and organizations are sometimes recommended. Reconstructionist activist Gary DeMar’s book God And Government is suggested reading, and Reconstructionist-oriented groups such as the Plymouth Rock Foundation and the Providence Foundation are touted as resources.

Perhaps most alarming, Barton also has had a relationship with the racist and anti-Semitic fringes of the far right. According to Skipp Porteous of the Massachusetts-based Institute for First Amendment Studies, Barton was listed in promotional literature as a “new and special speaker” at a 1991 summer retreat in Colorado sponsored by Scriptures for America, a far-right ministry headed by Pastor Pete Peters. Peters’ organization, which is virulently anti-Semitic and racist, spreads hysteria about Jews and homosexuals and has been linked to neo-Nazi groups. (The organization distributes a booklet called Death Penalty for Homosexuals.)

Peters’ church is part of the racist “Christian Identity” movement, and three members of The Order, a violent neo-Nazi organization, formerly attended Peters’ small congregation in LaPorte, Colo. After members of The Order murdered Denver radio talk show host Alan Berg in the mid-1980s, critics of Peters’ ministry in Colorado charged that his hate-filled sermons had spurred the assassination.

Who is David Barton? Why does he dislike separation of church and state so intensely? From the video, an observer might conclude that Barton is simply a hyperactive history student. The 1990 tape depicts him bumbling about what appears to be a rec room, pulling frail-looking history books from shelves and speaking breathlessly into the camera about what he has learned. The 1992 version features Barton in the same energetic form, only with a better backdrop and much improved graphics.

Barton believes he is on a mission from God—literally. In his 1988 book America: To Pray Or Not To Pray? Barton explains what got him started: “In July 1987, God impressed me to do two things. First, I was to search the library and find the date that prayer had been prohibited in public schools. Second, I was to obtain a record of national SAT scores (the academic test given to prospective college-bound high school students) spanning several decades. I didn’t know why, but I somehow knew that these two pieces of information would be very important.”

In America: To Pray Or Not To Pray? Barton attempts to prove that the quality of American life has declined because of the 1962 and ’63 Supreme Court rulings barring school-sponsored religious exercises in public schools. Barton believes God is angry at the country and has retaliated by, among other things, lowering SAT scores, raising the crime rate and even increasing alcohol consumption per capita.

Beyond that, details about Barton’s background are hard to find. His books and videos list no academic credentials and give no basic biographical information. A call by Church & State to Wallbuilders, Inc., the group Barton runs in Aledo, Texas, was unproductive. A staff member said Barton was traveling. Barton did not respond to Church & State’s request for an interview, and his staff refused to answer questions.

Wallbuilders’ bio of Barton is very brief and does not name the school he attended, saying only, “Although he entered college in Oklahoma on a science scholarship, he graduated
with a Bachelor's degree in Religious Education." The bio asserts that Barton taught math and science before forming Wallbuilders, though it does not say where.

(Wallbuilders takes its ironic name from a passage in Nehemiah 2, which reads, "Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." Like the Old Testament prophet Nehemiah, Barton apparently sees himself as chosen by God to rebuild his nation's moral foundations.)

According to Steven K. Green, legal counsel for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the type of bad history promoted by Barton and others is increasingly common in Religious Right circles.

Green, who is working on a Ph.D. dissertation in church-state relations during the 19th century, says Religious Right revisionists are trying to re-write American history to suit their political agenda. Green said the effort today is an extension of activity begun by conservative religious figures during the 19th century.

"During the post-Revolutionary period, orthodox ministers criticized the Constitution as being un-Christian and attacked many of the founders—especially Jefferson—for their non-traditional religious views," Green said. "These ministers advocated the continuation of state churches and saw the First Amendment as a threat to their privileged positions. But it wasn't until the mid 19th century that evangelicals began rewriting the history of the founding period to fit their perspective of America as a 'Christian nation.'"

Continued Green, "This type of revisionism is dangerous because it distorts the historical record by removing certain statements and events from their historical context. A distorted fact is always more persuasive than an outright lie."

DAVID BARTON'S BAD HISTORY

When A Myth Is As Good As A Mile

David Barton makes a number of inaccurate statements in his anti-separationist book The Myth of Separation and its accompanying videos. Barton also relies heavily on half truths, often failing to tell the whole story behind selected historical incidents.

Two versions of Barton's hour-long video "America's Godly Heritage" are in circulation. Although the newer edition (1992) omits some of the more egregious errors of the earlier tape, both are similar overall and contain the same information. (A condensed, 12-minute version of the tape titled "Foundations of American Government" is also in circulation.)

Since Barton's materials are being used increasingly by the Religious Right in their war against church-state separation, Church & State examined the book and videos carefully and prepared the following analysis of some of Barton's key points.

Barton: The Supreme Court in 1947 lifted the phrase "wall of separation between church and state" from a speech Thomas Jefferson made in 1801. Later in the speech, Jefferson went on to say, "That wall is a one directional wall. It keeps the government from running the church but it makes sure that Christian principles will always stay in government."

Response: This inaccurate claim about Jefferson is undoubtedly Barton's biggest mistake, and he omitted it in the updated version of his tape. But earlier copies remain in wide circulation, and the charge is being recycled repeatedly by the Religious Right.

Barton is wrong on three counts. In truth, Jefferson first used the "wall" metaphor in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. The letter says nothing about the wall being "one directional" and certainly does not assert that it was intended to keep Christian principles in government.

Barton: Fifty-two out of 55 of the founding fathers were "orthodox, evangelical Christians."

Response: This is a good example of the half truths common in Barton's materials. Most of the founders were members of the Church of England, which can hardly be described as an evangelical body. While it is true that many of the framers were devout Christians, that does not make them theological compatriots of today's Religious Right. (Barton must have again realized his mistake. In the updated version of the tape, he says 52 of the framers were simply "orthodox" Christians and adds, "Many of them were evangelicals.")

Richard V. Pierard, history professor at Indiana State University, calls Barton's claim "ridiculous." According to Pierard, the term "evangelical" did not come into wide use in America until the late 19th century and cannot properly be applied to any religious movement of the colonial period.

"To try to take a later definition and impose it on these people is a historical anachronism," Pierard said.

Barton: Early versions of the First Amendment considered by the Congress prove that all the framers meant to do was prohibit the establishment of a national church.

Response: This charge is an ironic one, because early versions of the First Amendment prove exactly the opposite. Before the language of the First Amendment we know today was settled on, drafts were submitted to Congress explicitly forbidding only the establishment of a national church or one denomination in preference to any other. These were all rejected. If Barton were
correct, and all the framers wanted to do was bar an official Church of the United States, one of these early versions would have sufficed.

Barton: In 1844 the Supreme Court ruled that public schools must include Christian worship.

Response: This is an oversimplified interpretation of a complex Supreme Court decision in a case known as *Vidal v. Girard’s Executors*. The controversy centered around the request of Stephen Girard, a wealthy Pennsylvanian whose will instructed that his money be used to set up a school for orphans. Girard, a native of France who was wary of clericalism, stipulated in the will that no members of the clergy could hold office in the school or even visit the campus.

Girard’s heirs challenged the bequest, but the Supreme Court, in a unanimous opinion, refused to nullify the stipulation. The will, the justices noted, had barred only clergy, not religious instruction entirely. The court also noted that the religious freedom provisions of the Pennsylvania Constitution were broad enough to provide “complete protection of every variety of religious opinion... and must have been intended to extend equally to all sects, whether they were Jews or infidels.”

Barton: In 1854 a small religious group asked Congress to officially establish a system of separation of church and state in the United States, but Congress refused.

Response: This is an example of Barton taking an obscure incident from U.S. history and, through distortion, giving it an exaggerated sense of importance. What actually happened is quite different from what Barton describes. A religious group did not ask Congress to establish church-state separation. Rather, a Baptist association from North Carolina and several citizens from Kentucky presented Congress with “memorials” (petitions) asking them to abolish congressional and military chaplains. In 1854 the House and Senate Judiciary Committees issued reports denying the petitions.

While there is language in the reports referring to the United States as a “Christian” nation, it is clear from the context that the committees saw the country as “Christian” only in a social sense, not a legal one.

Far from rejecting church-state separation, the Senate committee report specifically affirms the doctrine by stating that the First Amendment prohibits the government from giving any denomination financial “endowment at the public expense, peculiar privileges to its members or disadvantages or penalties upon those who should reject its doctrines or belong to other communions....”

Elsewhere the Senate document reads, “We are Christians, not because the law demands it, not to gain exclusive benefits, or to avoid legal disabilities, but from choice and education....”

(Not surprisingly, Barton never mentions that congressional committees in the latter half of the 19th century twice rejected proposed constitutional amendments that would have had the United States officially recognize the authority of Jesus and forthrightly state that America is a Christian nation.)

Barton: In the late 19th century “Christian principles in government” were challenged at the Supreme Court, but the justices upheld them and pointed out that Thomas Jefferson supported mixing Christianity and government.

Response: This is an extremely bad interpretation of 1879’s *Reynolds v. United States* decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Mormons do not have a religious freedom right to practice plural marriage. *Reynolds* was a free exercise case; it had nothing to do with a challenge to “Christian principles in government.” Furthermore, while the justices do quote from Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists that contains the “wall of separation between church and state” metaphor, they say nothing about Jefferson favoring Christian principles in government.

Clearly the justices could make no such assertion about Jefferson, as he never said anything even remotely akin to what Barton alleges. In reality, Jefferson specifically denied that Christianity is the basis of the common law and regarded efforts to declare it so as anti-separationist propaganda. In an 1824 letter to John Cartwright, Jefferson observed, “The proof... is incontrovertible; to wit, that the common law existed while the Anglo-Saxons were yet pagans, at a time when they had never heard the name Christ pronounced, or knew that such a character existed. What a conspiracy this, between Church and State!”

Barton: *Everson v. Board of Education*, a 1947 Supreme Court parochial school aid case, was the first court ruling upholding church-state separation.

Response: Barton’s assertion is incorrect. The U.S. Supreme Court had dealt with the church-state issue several times before *Eversorn* was decided. Many of these decisions upheld the separation concept.

For example, by 1947 the high court had already ruled that Jehovah’s Witnesses could not be compelled to salute the flag in public schools. In the early 1900s the high court decided a series of cases giving members of some religious groups the right to
refuse the military draft in wartime, granting them conscientious
objector status on the basis of religious belief. In 1925, the court
ruled unanimously that states could not force children to attend
public schools if their parents would rather send them to religious
institutions. In addition, numerous state courts and lower federal
courts had grappled with the church-state issue prior to 1947.

Barton: The Supreme Court’s decision in the 1962 case
Engel v. Vitale, which banned government-sponsored prayer in
public schools, cited no historical or legal precedents and relies
on a legal theory that the justices made up out of whole cloth.

Response: Even a brief perusal of the Engel opinion shows
that Barton is again wrong. In fact, Justice Hugo Black’s majority
opinion in Engel cites the history of the First Amendment and the
eye colonial experience with state-established religion. The
concurring opinion by Justice William Douglas cites several
previous church-state cases.

Barton: Religious practices in public schools had never been
challenged in the courts prior to 1962.

Response: 1962’s Engel case was the first time the U.S.
Supreme Court took up school prayer, but several state supreme
courts had ruled on the issue prior to that. For example, the
Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down government-sponsored
prayer in schools in 1892; the Nebraska Supreme Court followed
suit in 1902, and the Illinois Supreme Court removed mandatory
worship from public schools in 1910.

These are just a few examples. A 1960 survey by Americans
United found that only five states had laws on the books requiring
daily Bible reading in public schools. Twenty-four states all-
owed “optional” Bible reading. Eleven states had banned the
practice as unconstitutional. (The remaining states had no laws
on the subject.)

Aside from these specific distortions, Barton relies on a
variety of semantic tricks to mislead the viewers of his video. For
example, the Texas activist uses the terms “Supreme Court” and
“court” interchangeably throughout, which could lead an unin-
formed listener to believe that several low-level court decisions
at odds with separation of church and state are actually Supreme
Court rulings.

One such case is 1958’s Baer v. Kolmorgen, which Barton
cites as an example of how “the court” backed Christianity in
public schools prior to Engel. In reality, the case, which was
decided by a New York state appellate court, not the U.S.
Supreme Court, was only tangentially related to the religion in
schools issue. The ruling upheld the display of a Nativity scene
at a public school during Christmas break. The creche was
permissible, said the court, because the students were not attending
the institution at the time. This hardly amounts to a Supreme
Court blessing of Christian instruction in public schools.

Barton also relies on sweeping generalizations that overlook
the facts. For instance, he claims that by 1963 the Supreme Court
had “completely removed religion from public schools.” Barton
ignores 1952’s Zorach v. Clauson decision, in which the high
court upheld religion classes during the school day off school
property, because the ruling clashes with his ideological agenda.
He also ignores Justice Tom Clark’s comment in 1963’s Abing-ton School District v. Schempp case, which banned state-man-
dated Bible reading in public schools. “It certainly may be said,”
Clark observed, “that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary
and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that
such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively
as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected
consistently with the First Amendment.”

Finally, some of the arguments Barton makes are simply so
convoluted or bizarre that they can be dismissed out of hand. For
example, he claims that the doctrine of separation of powers—
the constitutional principle that provides for “checks and balanc-
es” among the three branches of the federal government, springs
from the biblical book of Jeremiah, 17:19. This is, to say the least,
a creative interpretation of the passage, which reads, “Thus said
the Lord unto me: Go and stand in the gate of the children of the
people, whereby the kings of Judah come in, and by which they
go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem.”

(Likewise, Barton asserts that our country’s three branches of
government were inspired by Isaiah 33:22. The passage reads,
“For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is
our king; he will save us.”)

But Barton’s most twisted argument centers on religion in
public schools. Atheism, he argues, is actually a religion that
holds that there should be no worship. Therefore, he insists, the
absence of government-backed religious exercises in public
schools is actually a violation of separation of church and state!

Barton also tosses what he calls the “three percent” majority.
His argument rests on public opinion polls indicating only 3
percent of the U.S. population identifies itself as atheist or
agnostic. Therefore, Barton asserts, removing state-sponsored
prayer from schools imposes the will of that 3 percent on the
other 97 percent.

Barton conveniently ignores the fact that opposition to gov-
ernment-sponsored religious exercises in public schools is not
limited to unbelievers. In fact, over the years the devoutly
religious have been major opponents of government-mandated
worship in schools. Clergy have filed and supported some of
the most important religion-in-schools cases in the courts. Today
many denominations maintain official policies opposing gov-
ernment prayer in schools.

It is true that some public opinion polls have shown support
for “prayer in schools” reaching as high as 80 percent. These
numbers usually result from poorly worded questions that fail to
make it clear that “prayer in schools” as the phrase is used by the
Religious Right equals government-sponsored prayer.

Support drops sharply when the proper distinctions are made.
For example, a 1989 survey by Parents magazine found 68
percent of respondents agreeing with the statement, “Although
no prayer should be said aloud, there should be a minute of
silence each day so that students could pray silently, meditate, or
do nothing if they prefer.” Only 17 percent favored the state-
ment, “A prayer should be said aloud once a day in public schools
and students should be required to participate,” which reflects
the pre-1962 situation that Barton backs.

—RB