

Blessed is the Nation.... Psalm 33:1-12 November 1, 2020

Gratefully adopted and adapted from, "Blessed Is The Nation, Part 1" by Melvin Newland @ SermonCentral.com

Suppose that sometime this week you turn on the TV and hear these announcements:

#1 - "Breaking news tonight is that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has just issued a statement: *'Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers.'*" (Letter to John Murray, Oct. 12, 1816) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay

When asked to clarify his remarks the Chief Justice said, "*No human society has ever been able to maintain both order and freedom, both cohesiveness and liberty apart from the moral precepts of the Christian Religion. Should our Republic ever forget this fundamental precept of governance, we will then, be surely doomed.*"https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay#cite_note-47

#2 "When asked what he thought of these recent developments, the President of the United States replied, *'can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever'*" — (Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII5) <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/quotations-jefferson-memorial>

#3 - "Furthermore, today Congress passed legislation affirming that, *'The Congress of the United States approves of and recommends ... the Holy Bible for use in the schools.'*"

What do you think the response to these announcements would be, especially in the media? I think there would be more reaction than we could even imagine. But the amazing thing is this; every one of these statements is historically accurate and factual.

It was **John Jay**, the very first Chief Justice, often called the "Father" of the Supreme Court and one of the primary writers of our Constitution, who wrote, "*It is the duty... of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers.*"

The remarks concerning *"our liberties being gifts from God ... and fears that their violation will bring His wrath,"* were made by **President Thomas Jefferson**. You can find these words engraved on the wall of his memorial in Washington D.C.



Not only did **Congress** in 1782, approve the use of the Bible in our schools, they even paid for them with tax dollars. In 1844, when a family filed suit trying to remove them from a strictly secular school, the **Supreme Court** at that time ruled: "*Why should not the Bible, and especially the New Testament, be read and taught as a divine revelation in the schools? Where can the purest principles of morality be learned so clearly or so perfectly as from the New Testament?*" <https://thefoundersbible.com/parties-agree-education-without-christianity-repugnant/#>

But, if these people, who were so instrumental in establishing our nation, were here to say and do those things in our country today, they'd be considered right-wing radicals and a threat to our nation. They would probably even be over-shouted by protestors... and I don't think I am exaggerating.

We've gone a long way away from our roots as Americans. So, one of my goals on the verge of our next national election is to do a little bit of education. While I'd rather preach Bible-based sermons, explaining a passage of Scripture and doing my best to apply its message to our lives today, there is so much about our early history that most Americans no longer learn in their schools or colleges, so if you don't hear it at church where will you hear it?

Here then are some things that are worth knowing about the roots of our nation, about what made America what it is today.

First, that America was settled by people looking for religious freedom

Yes, many colonies in America were founded primarily for the financial gain of their European owners, but most of America's earliest settlers came primarily looking for religious freedom. It was out of their quest for God, not gold, that America was born.

While the very first permanent settlements in America, just south of here at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, were commercial endeavors. Even so, with the settlement of the second Jamestown colony at Berkley Plantation, by company orders November 28, 1619, was to "*be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.*"



Those who next landed at Plymouth Colony in 1620 were specifically fleeing from religious oppression. The Mayflower Compact, which they signed while still aboard the ship, proclaimed that they had come to the new world for "*the glorie of God and the advancement of the Christian faith.*"

In 1643, as more colonists arrived up north, they joined together to form The New England Confederation, writing the first constitution in the New World which began, "*Whereas we all*

*came into these parts with one and the same end and aim, **namely to advance the kingdom of our lord Jesus Christ, and to enjoy the liberties of the gospel in purity and peace...***" <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-new-england-confederation/>



In 1681, having been awarded 44,000 acres of land in the New World, the Quaker **William Penn** founded his colony of Pennsylvania as a **"holy experiment"** where religious freedom would be the cornerstone of the new social order. Penn then traveled throughout the European continent, promoting the colony to both Quakers and other religious groups suffering persecution for their beliefs. Many accepted Penn's invitation to come to the New World, and "Penn's Woods" quickly became a multinational and multi-religious colony unlike any other in North America. <https://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-5> In fact, this idea of Pennsylvania modeling **God's peaceable kingdom** so captured the settler's imagination, that Quaker preacher and sign painter Edward Hicks was requested to paint over 100 versions of this image (*See Penn there in the background standing with the Indians*).

These are our spiritual forebears who came to America so they could worship and practice their faith without fear of persecution. Yes at other times people came, or were shipped here for less than honorable reasons, as indentured servants sold from Great Britain's debtor prisons, or as slaves from Africa, but the majority first came seeking to live out their faith in freedom and tolerance.

America's earliest settlers came primarily looking for freedom to practice their form of Christian faith without persecution. **They also had a strong desire to live a life pleasing to God and to do his will**

Yes, in the 150 years from the time of our earliest settlers to the beginning of our nation, we as a people have done and continue to do many things for which we should be ashamed. The first slaves to arrive in America were 20 Angolans kidnapped by Portuguese merchants and sold to the English settlers of Jamestown in 1619. Also, the way later colonists and even modern Americans persecuted and marginalized Native Americans continues to be a dark mark on our history.

As time passed and the original settlers died off, many of their descendants and the new arrivals became more concerned with wealth and a comfortable living rather than practicing their faith. The spiritual atmosphere of early America quickly deteriorated, Churches began dying and many Christians who had once sought religious freedom for themselves were now being intolerant of others. The end result was that by 1730, only about 10% of people in the Colonies attended church at all. That which had begun *"for the glorie of God and the advancement of the Christian faith"* almost disappeared from our land.

But then something amazing happened! Beginning in 1734 in New England, a handful of preachers – Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennant, John Wesley, and others – began revival meetings in the churches, in the streets and in the fields. These soon turned into great revival crusades that spread throughout the 13 Colonies.

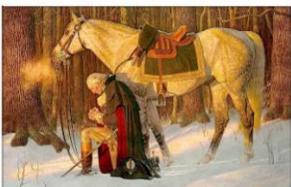
So many people returned to their Christian faith that the era came to be known as **“The Great Awakening.”**

Of Quaker heritage, but himself more of a deist, even **Benjamin Franklin** was so impressed with the new spiritual life in the colonies that he wrote, *“It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”* In fact, Franklin both campaigned for and helped to fund the construction of the **Philadelphia auditorium** to accommodate the crowds of up to 30,000 who regularly came out to hear Whitefield preach. All throughout the thirteen colonies, openly-devout Christians were no longer just 10% of the population. Now they made up 50% or more. It was a direct result of the Great Awakening that in 1760 the Scots-Irish immigrants to western Virginia began to build “meeting Houses” and call for pastors to come to Pisgah, the Peaks of Otter and other locations so that together they might study God’s word.

Did you also notice that the years of the “Great Awakening” were precursors to the American Revolution? The signers of the Declaration of Independence, who also wrote our Constitution and the Bill of Rights, who put their lives on the line and who fought and died that we might be free – all grew up and came into leadership during the “Great Awakening.”

What influenced the thinking these founders of the United States of America? Political-science professors at the University of Houston collected and cataloged 15,000 writings by the founding fathers in order to determine the primary source of ideas behind the Constitution. The primary source they found was the Bible; 94% of the quotes of our Revolutionary leaders were based upon the Bible, 34 percent came directly from the Bible (Deuteronomy was the most quoted). <https://www.myplainview.com/news/article/My-Turn-Reader-says-America-founded-as-Christian-8930812.php>

The point of all this is that the cultural environment on the eve of the American Revolution was undeniably Christian and this focus dramatically affected the thoughts and actions of the men and women who gave birth to this nation.



Here is a portion of one of the many hand written prayers from the personal diary of George Washington: *“O eternal and everlasting God Direct my thoughts, words and work. Wash away my sins in the immaculate blood of the lamb, and purge my heart by thy Holy Spirit, from the dross of my natural corruption, that I may with more freedom*

of mind and liberty of will serve thee, the everlasting God, in righteousness and holiness this day, and all the days of my life. Increase my faith in the sweet promises of the Gospel. Give me repentance from dead works. Pardon my wanderings, & direct my thoughts unto thyself, the God of my salvation. Teach me how to live in thy fear, labor in thy service, and ever to run in the ways of thy commandments. <https://www1.cbn.com/george-washingtons-prayer-journal-4>

George Washington was a "born again" Christian, yet he also owned slaves. So did **Thomas Jefferson**, who like Franklin, was a Deist by faith, but also strangely enough was so opposed to slavery that he attempted to include its ban in the Constitution. After the death of his first wife, Jefferson then secretly lived with the slave, **Sally Hemming** as his second wife, because in Virginia, since 1661, it was illegal for them marry. Their four surviving children were all trained as artisans and at their maturity given their freedom. To this day the Hemming descendants are proud of their historic connection to Thomas Jefferson; the two families regularly hold reunions at Monticello.

Yes, many of our historic leaders had clay feet and cultural blind spots, as do we all to this day. Everyone is a product of their time and should only be judged in accordance with their time, not by the standards of a different age **which we are currently guilty of doing today**, by ignoring these Revolutionary heroes' virtues and accomplishments and pulling down their statues.

Third, you also need to know that these leaders acknowledged God's supreme rule over all people and all nations; especially the United States of America. Do you remember the prologue to the Declaration of Independence?

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that **they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights**, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."*

They were saying, "We want a form of government whose job is to protect what the Creator has given to each of us." Then, after listing a series of charges against the actions of the King of England, they make two more references to God, first "appealing to [God as] *the Supreme Judge of the World...*" and then ending with, "for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of *Divine Providence*" [God], "we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."



Have you seen this painting of the first Continental Congress in prayer? Perhaps you have heard the story of how they were discussing and debating the Declaration of Independence. Finally, one of them suggested they all get on their knees and ask God what should be done. So the framers of the Declaration of Independence went to their knees to pray and seek the wisdom and guidance of God. In a letter to his wife Abigail, John Adams wrote "the

most amazing thing occurred. Even the stern old Quakers had tears gushing down their cheeks." Wouldn't it be wonderful today if our president, our congress and our Supreme Court, would just get down on their knees like our forefathers to ask, "God, what do you want for this nation?" The United States of America was founded by leaders who acknowledged God's supreme rule over this nation.

That is why President Thomas Jefferson worried, *can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?*

Following the Revolutionary War as settlers quickly expanded westward and too far apart to gather for worship, Christian fervor again diminished in America. The story is told that as a circuit-riding preacher came upon a cabin in the Kentucky hills, he asked the lady of the house if there were any Presbyterians around the area. To which she replied that she didn't rightly know, but her husband having kilt just about every critter around these parts, he was welcome to check out back of the barn to see if such were among any of the skins stretched out there to dry.



In 1830, it was circuit-riding preachers leading camp meetings and brush-arbor revivals that brought a **Second Great Awakening** to America. This awakening saw the formation of many frontier colleges, the rapid growth of Methodist and Baptist Churches along with divisions in older mainline denominations as churches split over the issue of slavery. Remember that Bedford Presbyterian Church

began as an abolitionist split off from the Peaks Presbyterian Church and before the war proudly claimed both black and white members. The Abolitionist movement and sadly the Civil War were both largely byproducts of renewed Christian convictions coming out of the Second Great Awakening.

Of course the war did so much damage, both physically and spiritually to the nation, as well as the southern States that active Christianity again suffered decline. But it soon resurged with the **Third Great Awakening** of the early twentieth century with its emphasis on – and sadly also excesses of – personal pietism and tent revivalism. It was this awakening that advanced the **Temperance Movement** and **voting rights for women across America**. The newly empowered Christian movements' wrongful decision then to try to enforce Christian morality through Blue Laws and Prohibition brought about the backlash of the Roaring Twenties.

Once again focused more on wealth than faith, the **Roaring Twenties** led into the **Great Depression**, which only ended as America's geared up for the Second World War. The end of the **World War 2** saw both a return to church, but also a booming American economy now embracing the new economic strategy of **consumerism**, which set the stage for our current cultural and religious malaise.

Our nation's last Christian resurgence was probably the national para-church youth revival from 1950- 1970 (from which I came). In contrast most American Churches began losing membership after 1965 as their pastors departed from conservative evangelical Christian roots in an attempt to be more relevant to the rapidly growing **secular humanist** culture, which largely rejected any concept of responsibility to God for goals of "**personal peace and affluence.**" You can easily see where the ideals of personal peace and affluence have brought our nation, now deeply and sadly divided philosophically, politically, racially and between the haves and have not's.



My concluding point is this. Whether or not America has been uniquely protected and directed by God from the very start, I cannot say. But America has been greatly blessed by the Christians who came to these shores seeking religious freedom and a better life, both for themselves and their neighbors. **Our American government was also founded upon Biblical principles, with a strong reliance on the Christian faith and Christian morality to keep us united.** And every time America has drifted away from its faith, it was Christians who boldly and bodily stood up to bring the country back from the edge.

Once again, our country is facing a great divide and once again it is because our national faith in God has dwindled. If we have any hopes of "*making America great again*" as one of our candidates likes to say, it won't be through border walls, expanded commerce, or universal Medicare for all, it will be when we repent of our sins of greed and self-comfort and return to those Christian values that once again have us loving our neighbors – of all colors and faiths – as much as we love ourselves. Yes, as Christians, we can and should be gracious to other faiths as long as we remember that together we form one nation under God.

One last comment. Did you know that the tallest structure in Washington, D.C. - which some people are now calling for its removal – is the Washington Monument? And do you know that inscribed on the very top of that monument are these Latin words from scripture? "Laus Dei"... "**Praise be to God.**"

The Psalmist declared "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.*" God has greatly blessed us in the past, let us pray and work that He might again bless us in the future.