

Remembering Our Roots

July 3, 2016

PRELUDE – My Lighthouse

**Worship – My Lighthouse / Transition
/ Great God Who Saves / This I Believe**

**Drama – Vaguely Remembered History
Man**

**Feature Song – Where the Stars and
Stripes and Eagles Fly**

Tomorrow is July 4th – a day on which almost every American will participate in a picnic or a party or celebration of some sort. It's also a day on which almost every American will give no thought to what they are celebrating or why.

That's probably a bit too strong.

Most people, if asked, would tell you that they are celebrating *Independence Day* – that July afternoon 240 years ago when the Continental Congress of the 13 American Colonies officially approved, printed and disseminated *The Declaration of Independence*. But most people would also admit to knowing very little about the circumstances surrounding that declaration and the events and the foundational mindset that led up to it.

So, in the interest of making our Fourth of July all the more meaningful, let's check out this short video from the History Channel.

Video Clip – The Story of Us: Declaration of Independence (3.9 min)

Begin: Voice – “The Declaration of Independence, for me, is ...”

End: Brokaw – “We can make decisions for ourselves.”

Of course, as you know, that Declaration was only the first step in a long journey towards becoming a free and independent nation. To begin with, the King of England didn't take too kindly to a revolt of his subjects, so there was a long and costly war to be fought. Then, in order to form a more perfect union of the victorious colonies, there was a Constitution and Bill of Rights to be debated, written and adopted as well as a government formed.

A Unique Motivation

And all of that in-and-of-itself is fascinating history but what I want to focus on this morning was the unique justification for

declaring independence ... which, for most of the colonists, was no small thing. Not only was there the question (as we heard in the video) of “is this really what we want?” there was also the issue of “can we really do this – can we win a war? And what if we can’t?”

240 years removed and knowing the outcome, it all seems pretty simple but, at the time, there was no doubt that it would take a miracle – an intervention of what they called Divine Providence – for them to be successful ... which leads to the other question that the people and leaders of that day had to wrestle with, which was actually the main question. Not only were there questions of intention, feasibility and consequences, there was also the question of morality.

Is it right for us to revolt? Is it right for us to turn our backs on the authority to whom we are pledged as subjects – the King of England?

And again, this was no small issue because for centuries there had been a prevailing thought in the European world that a king was given the right to rule by God himself and, therefore, he was above any earthly authority. He could do as he saw fit and the people – especially if they were Christians (which most were) – were obligated to obey. So, for the colonies to declare independence and to revolt would mean rejecting the “divine right of kings” to rule. And that was a really big deal. It would be a huge step into uncharted territory.

But they did it – they took that step – because they had come to believe in a moral principle even greater than the divine right of kings. And that principle – which was the justification for the declaration and everything it implied – is spelled out in these words:

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,

-- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government ...

The moral principle that trumps the divine right of kings, this declaration claims, is the right of *individual liberty*. And this right is not something granted by any human authority or government. Its legitimacy is rooted in a Supreme Being who grants it to all. It is an *inalienable birthright*. It's yours just because you're alive.

Furthermore, the Declaration asserts, the primary role of monarchies and governments is to *secure* those divinely endowed and unalienable rights of the

people. Therefore, when monarchies and governments *don't* do that; when they instead become tyrannical – a condition under which the colonists had been living for decades and which the Declaration goes on to spell out in great detail; when that happens, the people consequently have the right and indeed the duty to alter or abolish their government.

Now, because you and I and our parents and grandparents have lived under that kind of a philosophy for our entire lives, that doesn't seem like such a big deal. But to those who first proposed it and carried it out, it was radical. It totally flipped the moral and ethical thinking of the day as it relates to individual rights and the power

of the state.

Bottom line, the new philosophy could be stated like this:

People's rights (not the monarchy's rights) are divine in origin, sacred and unalienable.

Governments are human in origin, answerable to the people and dependent entirely on their consent.ⁱ

Now, again, the reason I am pointing this out is to highlight the unique justification for declaring independence. This was not a decision finally made in anger (though people were angry). This was not a decision made because people were tired of paying exorbitant taxes (though many were).

This was a philosophical, theological,

spiritual, moral, religious decision based on a belief that there is a Creator God to whom we are accountable; a Supreme Being who made humans in His image; humans who, therefore, are meant to be free.

Our Spiritual Roots

Of course, in our day and time, we don't hear much about that motivation.

After all, we've been told, "the founders intended to build a wall of separation between government and religion. So even though they may have used the G-word a lot they really didn't mean it the way it sounds, especially to those of us who are Christians."

Furthermore, we've been told, "a lot of the

founders were Deists not Christians. So when they said Supreme Being they weren't talking about the God of the Bible in a spiritual way.”

Finally, in our day and time, the concept of individual freedom is often equated with *freedom from religion*, so the thought that our freedom as citizens is rooted *in God* seems strange and even contradictory to us.

So, for those reasons, I want to take a few minutes and rewind the clock so to speak and share with you three things worth knowing about the spiritual roots of our nation.

1. Our founders (the guys who produced our Declaration of Independence) were undeniably

spiritual and many were committed Christians.

Why do I say that?

Well, for one thing, back in the late 1990s, political-science professors at the University of Houston collected and cataloged 15,000 writings by the founding fathers. Their goal was to determine the primary source of ideas behind the Constitution by identifying the sources quoted most often in their writings. Guess what that primary source was? It was the Bible. It was quoted four times more often than the runner up, the French philosopher Charles Montesquieu. 94% percent of the quotes of the founders were based upon the Bible.ⁱⁱ

Another reason I say that is because of

what was happening in our country spiritually in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. In the mid-1700s a handful of preachers – Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, John and Charles Wesley – began to hold great crusades and revivals throughout the 13 colonies. So many people came to Christ that that era is known as “The Great Awakening.” Whitefield, it was reported, at times preached to as many as 15,000 people in outdoor settings.

Now, here’s why that’s important: *the generation that experienced the Great Awakening became the leaders of the American Revolution.*ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, in the days leading up to the Declaration, church attendance in general in the colonies was between 60 and 70 percent.^{iv} This morning in our

community it's only about 20%.

Our founders were undeniably spiritual and many were committed Christians. That's the first thing worth knowing.

Here's the second:

2. Our founders believed that our nation's birth was an act of God.

It wasn't something that people decided to do. It was an event that happened as the direct intervention of God in history – the Divine Hand of Providence.

That's why the Continental Congress issued *nine* proclamations calling for days of thanksgiving to God. For example ...^v

- In 1778, after the victory at Saratoga

and the formal alliance with France, Congress set aside December 30, 1778 as “a day of public thanksgiving and praise, that all the people may, with united hearts, on that day, express a just sense of his unmerited favors; particularly in that it hath pleased him, by his overruling providence, to support us in a just and necessary war” by causing King Louis of France to enter the war on the American side and giving the Americans victory over British troops.

- In 1780, after the discovery of Benedict Arnold’s betrayal and plans to surrender West Point, the Congressional Thanksgiving proclamation thanked God for “rescuing George Washington and the

army from imminent dangers, at the moment when treason was ripened for execution.”

- The next year, Congress asked the people to offer thanks for God’s hand in the capture of a British army at Yorktown.
- In 1784, with the war ending, Congress concluded, “the benign interposition of Divine Providence hath, on many occasions, been most miraculously and abundantly manifested.”

Three years later at the Constitutional Convention on June 28, 1787, Benjamin Franklin delivered his most famous speech. At the age of 81 he said: "In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were

sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers were heard and graciously answered.”^{vi}

Almost 30 years later, President James Madison issued a Thanksgiving proclamation that read, “No people ought to feel greater obligations to celebrate the goodness of the Great Disposer of Events of the Destiny of nations than the people of the United States.”^{vii}

Our founders believed that God was intimately involved in the founding of this nation. That’s the second thing worth knowing about the spiritual roots of our nation.

3. Finally, and most importantly, you should know that our founders

designed our government to rest on the pillars of morality and religion.

They believed that our form of government – of the people, by the people and for the people – could only be successful as long as those people remained moral and religious.

For example, in his Farewell Address, George Washington reminded his countrymen that “religion and morality” are the “firmest props of the duties of men and citizens” and therefore are “indispensable supports” of “the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity.”

In addition, he said that morality depends on religion: “Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious

principle.” Religion, he thus suggested, is necessary to the preservation of “free government.”^{viii}

John Adams, 2nd President of the United States, co-drafter of the Declaration of Independence, echoed Washington when he said "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion ... Our Constitution was made only for moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."(15)

That's why just after the Revolution, in 1782, this statement appeared in the Congressional Record:

"The Congress of the United States

approves and recommends to the people, the Holy Bible ... for use in schools."(18)

By the way, when that recommendation was challenged several years later, the Supreme Court 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?"(19)

Morality and religion were at the root of our system of government. And, as the Supreme Court ruling implied, that religion was *the Christian religion*. John Quincy

Adams, the 6th President of the United States, noted that "The highest glory of the American revolution was that it connected the principles of civil government and the principles of Christianity."(20)

150 years later, Chief Justice Earl Warren (who was not known as a political conservative) echoed that same idea in a speech where he said:

“I believe that no one can read the history of our country without realizing the Good Book and the Spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses. Whether we look to the First Charter of Virginia, or to the Charter of New England, or to the Charter of Massachusetts Bay the same object is

present: A Christian land governed by Christian principles.

I believe the entire Bill of Rights came into being because of the knowledge our forefathers had of the Bible and their belief in it." (24)

Recent scholarship, again from the University of Houston, confirms Warren's conviction. Three-fourths of the provisions of the U.S. Bill of Rights were outlined in the 1641 Massachusetts Body of Liberties, written by Puritans, complete with Bible verses attached to each of the rights. (25)

Now, none of that is to argue that the intention of the founders was to create a

“Christian nation.” It wasn’t. That’s why there is no mention of God in the Constitution. That’s why the federal government is forbidden from interfering with the practice of religion and from establishing a state church (which is how it was in Europe).

But make no mistake about it, friends. Something spiritually significant happened in the founding days of the United States.

- Our leaders were spiritually oriented
- They believed God had ordained the existence of this country
- And they built our system of government on the pillars of morality and religion.

These are at least some of our spiritual

roots as a nation.

The Source of Freedom

And it is from these roots that the concept of the God-given, God-based right of individual liberty springs ... for God is pro-freedom.

Jesus said ...

*“If you continue to follow my teaching, you are really my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... [and] if the son sets you free, you will be really free.”
John 8:31-32,36 (NET)*

The Apostle Paul wrote (and Greg read this earlier):

It is for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1 (NET)

Now, both Jesus and Paul had the idea of *spiritual freedom* in mind when they said and wrote these things (so that it would be possible to live as free even if you were not) but the principle is clear: *no man or woman is intended to be anything less than free.*

Obviously, and sadly, the founders of our nation did not drive this principle to its full and logical conclusion: the issue of African slavery (a decision which troubled many of the founders at the time and which many later regretted). But the application of this principle as the motivation and justification to break free from the tyrannical rule of King George pushed the

first domino (so to speak), so that it was only a matter of time before slavery was dealt with. It was only a matter of time before women were given legal status with full rights as citizens.

Of course, some would argue “but that would have happened anyway, Rick. You’re making way too much out of this being a spiritual thing. You’re making way too much about this right being rooted in God.”

Maybe. Maybe not. After the Revolution, Thomas Jefferson said (and this is engraved on his memorial, by the way), “God gave us life and gave us liberty. Can the liberty of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction these liberties are the gift of God?”(11)

Apparently, Jefferson who was not in any sense an orthodox Christian, seemed to think freedom rooted in a Supreme Being was a big deal.

Furthermore, in odd coincidence of history, not long after the American Revolution ended, the French Revolution began. It was a fight for freedom from the monarchy, too, but in this case, instead of embracing a God-centered view of freedom, the people actually rejected God. In fact, they closed churches and transformed some into Temples of Reason and held pseudo-religious festivals in honor of the Goddess of Reason.

The result: the Reign of Terror in which tens of thousands of citizens were marched

to the guillotine. The chaos eventually paved the way for a super-king, an emperor, a brutal dictator by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Scholars have suggested that at least part of the reason for the relative calmness of the American Revolution (especially in its aftermath) compared to the French Revolution was the overt spiritual dimension of the American Revolution vs. the overt atheistic dimension of the French. No one knows for sure, but in the mid-1830s, a young Frenchman by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville was given the assignment to come to America to study the culture. And he did. He traveled all over the United States doing countless interviews with leaders and ordinary citizens.

The result of his effort was a huge two-volume work – a classic – called *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville, having experienced the fallout of the French Revolution, had a unique perspective from which to view what *had* happened and what *was* happening in this country. And one of the things that struck him over and over was the necessity of religion to the American experience.

He wrote:

“Americans combine the notions of Christianity and liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other.”

As to why that was true, Tocqueville observed that Christianity teaches a

theological equality that suggests to men's minds a kind of political equality as well.

“Christianity,” he wrote, “which has rendered all men [spiritually] equal before God [i.e. we're all sinners in need of a savior] ... Christianity will not be loath to see all citizens equal before the law.”

In other words, because Christianity holds that we're all equal before God, it also holds that we're all equal before the law ... which is a huge building block of freedom.

That said, Christianity's contribution in this might seem superfluous to us as modern human beings. For you and me, we instinctively believe in equality before the law and in political equality more generally because as far as we can remember, it has

always been a fundamental principle of our society.

Tocqueville's observation, however, is based on the long view of human history. It reminds us that if we consider *the whole story* of the human race, democracy and equality are *not* society's default position. The political communities of classical Greece and Rome, Tocqueville observes, had deep social and political inequalities that were so well established and so taken for granted that modern ideas of equality and universal rights would be inconceivable even to the "most profound and vast geniuses" of the ancient world.

Under these conditions, he wrote, "it was necessary that Jesus Christ come to earth to make it understood that all members of the

human species are naturally alike and equal.”^{ix}

So What?

Now, at this point, I know some of you are thinking, “Thanks for the history lesson, Rick. It’s very interesting. But what do you want us to do with this information?”

- I want you to appreciate what you have when you celebrate tomorrow.
- And I want you to understand that the freedom you have isn’t an accident.
- And I don’t want you to fall for the lie that your freedom is simply another step in the long line of human progress as if human beings would

have inevitably gotten to this point on our own.

The freedom we have is the exception to the rule. It took a spiritual, religious, theological philosophical understanding that human rights come from God ... which means that we're accountable to Him for how we treat others, whether we're in position of power or just a neighbor.

As Paul wrote:

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity to indulge your flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, namely, "You must love your neighbor as

yourself.” Galatians 5:13-14
(NET)

What would happen if people lived like that? If Christians lived like that?

I think the world – at least our small part of it – would be different. I think we would shine like lights in the darkness.

Next week, we’ll begin the third in our Shine series of series. We’re going to begin talking about what it means to be a God-centered person and how that brings light into the darkness of our world. I hope you’ll be here for that.

<Prayer>

Closing Comments

Before we leave, a couple of things you need to know about ... so let's check out the video board.

Announcements – Video

By the way, last night Shannon said that they specifically need 6 more folks from 1-6pm tomorrow and 4 more from 5:30-10:30 to help bag and stock. And we could also use 6 more at 11pm to help with pack up and tear down.

Finally, if you need to pray with someone, Kitti is here.

See you next week!

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://allthingsliberty.com/2016/02/why-god-is-in-the-declaration-but-not-the-constitution/>

ⁱⁱ David T. Moore, *Five Lies of the Century*, pg 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening* (1843; *Banner of Truth*, 1976); and Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), section 2.

^{iv} <https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/religion-colonial-america-trends-regulations-and-beliefs>

^v <https://allthingsliberty.com/2015/11/the-revolutionary-war-generation-and-thanksgiving/>

^{vi} Norman Cousins, *In God We Trust* (Harper & Bros., 1958), 42.

^{vii} James Madison, *A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America*, March 4, 1815.

^{viii} See <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/03/tocqueville-on-christianity-and-american-democracy>

^{ix} From <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/03/tocqueville-on-christianity-and-american-democracy>