

AMERICA AT A CROSSROADS, by Chris J Fenner, Nov 2020

Part 1 of 4 – God’s Sovereign Hand on America (Creation to 1630 AD)

HISTORY is an important part of our Christian faith.

The Old Testament follows the history of mankind from creation through God’s chosen people, to about 400 years before the birth of Christ. Also the New Testament follows the history of Jesus from conception to His death and resurrection, and then on through the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of Paul.

For us to understand where we are as a nation, and to gain God’s perspective as a nation, we need to look at the journey we have taken – both in times of following GOD’S WAY and in times of rebellion when we followed MAN’S WAY.

To start our look at this journey, we need to go back to the very beginning of world history – “His Story” – to God’s creation of mankind.

Genesis 1:27-28

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

At the beginning of time God was omniscient, all-knowing:

- God knew the placement of the continents on planet Earth.
- God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, somewhere in the Middle East.
- God knew that to “fill the earth” – as He had commanded – meant that the people would go out from the Middle East to the east and to the west eventually meeting again on the far side of the globe – America.

A theme of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, that is important for us to remember today, is mankind’s SINFULNESS AND REBELLION AGAINST GOD.

After Noah and the Flood, this depravity of mankind is again emphasized in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-8.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.

They said to each other, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth.

The call of Abraham is the start of GOD’S REDEMPTION OF MANKIND recorded in Genesis 12:1-3

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

As we know, Abraham became the Father of the Jewish people. And through David’s line God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem mankind. This happened at another pivotal time in history – the Roman Empire.

Luke 2:1-3 tells us in the story of Jesus’ birth ...

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE lasted for about 1000 years from 509 BC when Rome became a republic to 476 AD with the fall of Rome and the start of the “dark ages”.

Julius Caesar was de-facto emperor from 60 BC to 44 BC and he was responsible for the major expansion of the Roman Empire and the road system – including the establishment of my home town of Gloucester in England, called Glevum at that time.

It was this expansion of the road system throughout much of Europe and the Middle East that facilitated the growth of the early church through Paul and the other disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus never intended that CHRISTIANITY BECOME A STATE RELIGION. This is clear from

Matthew 22:18-21

But Jesus, knowing the evil intent [of the Pharisees], said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.”

They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

A state religion came to be, however, when Constantine became the Roman Emperor in 306 AD and converted to Christianity. He mandated that the Roman Empire be a Christian empire, and, consequently, the Roman Catholic Church was established as the state church.

The power of the state coupled with the sinfulness of man resulted in many errors coming into the church, including:

- Keeping scriptures in Latin so that ordinary people could not read or understand the Word of God without a priest.
- The horrors of the Inquisitions.
- The payment of indulgencies, a corrupt practice of extorting money from ordinary people on the pretense that they could reduce their punishment in purgatory by giving money to the church.

THE REFORMATION, to cleanse the church, again came at God’s perfect time.

One essential need for real change was the ability to get the Word of God directly to the people, and this was made possible with the invention of the print press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1436.

The Reformation was led by a number of people in Germany, England and Switzerland over a period of 150 years, but one person and one event stand out. Martin Luther, who on October 31st 1571 (450 years ago) posted his 95 Theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Three key points of the Reformation theology were – and still are today:

- sola scriptura, scripture alone,
- sola gratia, grace alone,

- sola fide, faith alone.

Luther and the other Reformation leaders all corrected the Roman Catholic error of keeping the Bible in Latin with translation of the Bible into German, English and other European languages.

Three passages of scripture that marked the Reformation were:

Romans 1:17

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

With the Reformation in place, and the DISCOVERY OF AMERICA by Christopher Columbus in 1492, God’s mighty hand was ready to move in the hearts of men for another part of His plan for mankind to unfold – East meeting West in America.

Once again – and as always has been the case – and as always will be the case – man’s sinfulness entered the picture.

This time the Church of England started to err from God’s Word and was challenged by two groups:

- the Puritans who wanted to purify the church,
- the Separatists who considered the Church errors so severe that they needed to separate from the church. This resulted in the persecution and imprisonment of many Separatists.

A large number of the Separatists fled to Holland, and then a portion of these set out on the Mayflower to be the first “Pilgrims” to colonize New England – arriving on November 9th 1620 – 400 years ago.

The second wave of colonists to come to America were the Puritans who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. Their leader was John Winthrop who said...

“For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill.

“The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.”¹

Comparing these words to Jeremiah 18:9 and 10 we find a remarkable alignment.

“And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

These words of Jeremiah and John Winthrop ring true for today, as we will see when we continue the theme of America at a Crossroads in the next part.

Amen

END NOTES

1. “City Upon a Hill” excerpt from “A Modell of Christian Charitie” by Governor John Winthrop, 1630. Reproduced in the *Journal of the American Education Society*, November, 1840, p. 220.