

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

Part 3 of 4 – The Miracle of the United States of America (1776 to 1900 AD)

We are in the third part of a four part series on “America at a Crossroads”, with one road marked GOD’S WAY and the other road marked MAN’S WAY.

In the first part we looked at how the first European settlers in America were part of God’s master plan for the completion of Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth”

And in the second part we looked at the decline in reliance on God as the people in the emerging 13 colonies relied more and more on themselves.

We also looked at the renewed fire of the Great Awakening led by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.

Their teachings dramatically emphasized the holiness of God and the depravity of man, with the vital need for Christians to become true and full followers of Christ so that the words of 1 Peter 2:9-10 could be said of them.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

In this part, we will look at how God’s mighty hand – GOD’S PROVIDENCE – moved in the hearts and lives of the people in the 13 colonies, now united in faith and purpose, leading to:

- The Declaration of Independence,
- The War of Independence,
- The establishment of The Constitution of the United States.

First, THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

A key feature of The Declaration of Independence is the four references to God. The first two are in the preamble of the declaration and they are about the nature of God in the foundation of America. The text reads:

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth...

the separate and equal station to which **the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God** entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

“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.”

The second two references to God are in the Declaration itself, and they appeal to God's intervention and protection.

Returning to the text...

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, **appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world** for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare,

- That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States;
- that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, ...;
- and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

And for the support of this Declaration, **with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence**, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

God honored this appeal of the colonists in THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE with His providential hand:

- protecting them from almost certain defeat at the outset of the war by a providential fog rising on the East River at New York allowing Washington's forces to escape from Manhattan;
- providing a terrible winter storm on Christmas night of 1776 that covered the Colonial army's daring crossing of the half-frozen Delaware River to defeat the British forces at Trenton;

- unmasking the treachery of Benedict Arnold in his attempt to pass critical information to the British about the deployment of Washington's forces;
- sustaining Washington's forces through the ferocious winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge, when his men were close to starving and many were without protective clothes and shoes.

At that time the Reverend Muhlenburg noted, "The Lord God has singularly, yea marvelously, preserved [George Washington] from harm in the midst of countless perils ... and has hitherto graciously held him in His hand as His chosen vessel." ⁴

The war dragged on to 1782. God was faithful throughout the conflict and brought the victory so that the new nation could turn its attention to the much needed CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES in the spring of 1787.

Unlike The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of The United States contains no reference to God. This has resulted in many people maintaining that it is a purely secular document.

However, just as the book of Esther in the Bible has no direct mention of God – yet His presence is powerfully at work in every part of the story – likewise God's presence is powerfully undergirding the content of our Constitution.

Before looking at the construction of the Constitution, an important insight on the mindset of the framers at the Constitutional Convention comes from a speech made by Benjamin Franklin – a deist – at a point in the convention when they were deadlocked over the issue of state representation in the Senate.

Benjamin Franklin said,

"I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?"

"We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that 'except the Lord build they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel:

"We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall be become a reproach and a bye word down to future age.

“And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom, and leave it to chance, war, and conquest.”⁵

Shortly after this speech the deadlock was resolved and the Constitution was finalized.

With a Biblical world view, the framers clearly understood the sinfulness of man – even though many were not devout Christians – and they crafted the Constitution on this principle as confirmed by The Federalist Papers.

These Papers – eighty-two articles written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay – outline the philosophy and motivation of the framers in preparing the Constitution. They were written to help convince the states to ratify the document.

For example, Federalist No. 51 on Checks and Balances written by James Madison reads:

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.

If men were angels, no government would be necessary.

If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.

“In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men the great difficulty lies in this; you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place to control itself.”⁶

Thus, with this Biblical perspective of the sinfulness of man, the Constitution was written with separation of powers to provide the checks and balances needed to succeed. Notwithstanding these precautions, our Founding Fathers knew that the nation still needed RELIGION & MORALITY to survive and thrive.

George Washington spoke powerfully about this in his farewell speech to Congress in 1796.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.

“The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public [well-being].

“Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths ... of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.

“Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education ..., reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” ⁷

Therefore it can be seen that in the twenty year period between The Declaration of Independence and George Washington’s farewell speech, God’s Presence had worked powerfully among our Founding Fathers to establish this nation with a form of government after His own heart.

THE NEXT 100 YEARS through the 19th century brought many challenges to the new nation. The most profound challenge was, of course, the correction of the grievous evil of slavery, with the civil war taking the lives of over 600,000 people.

Also the Native American population and the largely European American population came to a less than perfect resolution to their conflicts with the establishment of the Reservation system.

The Lord, by His providential hand, again prepared the nation for these challenges by the Second Great Awakening, which occurred in the early 19th century, led by the powerful teaching of Charles Finney and Francis Asbury. As in the First Great Awakening, they stressed the holiness of God and the depravity of man. Charles Finney’s passionate preaching reenergized the church in the northeastern states whereas Francis Asbury travelled tirelessly through the frontier states establishing Methodist churches. This Great Awakening resulted in tremendous growth of the Church ahead of the Civil War.

After the Civil War, the sovereign Lord continued to bless the nation in population growth and prosperity, and another Awakening occurred in the second half of the 19th century that helped heal the wounds of the war so that by the end of the century a Supreme Court justice could declare, “This is a Christian nation.” ⁸

Amen

END NOTES

4. Benjamin Hart, *Faith & Freedom* (Dallas, TX, Lewis and Stanley Publishers, 1988), 293.
5. Benjamin Franklin, Speech at the Constitutional Convention (Benjamin Franklin's Historical Society, <http://www.benjamin-franklin-history.org>).
6. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, *The Federalist Papers, Federalist No. 51, The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments*, 1787.
7. George Washington, *George Washington's Farewell Address to Congress*, 1796, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/>
8. Justice David J. Brewer, *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S.457 (1892),