

The Source of Our Freedoms

Deuteronomy 8:11-14; 17-19
John 8:31-36

The Reverend Chip Fisher
July 5, 2009

It's fitting for us as Americans, on this Fourth of July holiday celebration of our independence from Great Britain, to give thought and thanks for the freedoms we enjoy. For better or worse, I'm afraid I'm going to start with an overview of our early national history which for over two centuries was elementary to almost every American—but which now, sadly, too many have forgotten, were never taught, or have chosen to disbelieve. Then I'll talk about some of our early Congregationalist history in New England: a lot of history this morning! I'm only sorry we don't still know all this.

The British intellectual G. K. Chesterton observed roughly a century ago that “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.” What did he mean? According to a recent Gallup poll, two thirds of American adults today (66%) do not know that the phrase, “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” are found in our Declaration of Independence. (In fact they are the opening words following the preamble of that Declaration, which also refers to “Nature and Nature's God”—but let's not quibble: you get full credit if you knew these words, this divine basis for all rights and freedoms, were in there somewhere!)

Those founders understood the necessary balance between rights and freedoms, and duties and responsibilities. They understood that God alone is the true source of human dignity and liberty, and that no basis for what we now call “human rights” which rests in anything less than the character and intention of “Nature's God” is secure, permanent, or trustworthy.

Way back then they well understood that if there's no God, then there are no inalienable rights. Who assigns value to any person? Who's to say that liberty is superior to tyranny? Who's to say that concentration camps and ovens of death are not a good idea? If the State can giveth, the State can taketh away. Apart from the reality of the God shown us definitively in Jesus the Christ, all human affairs come

down to personal preference, propaganda, and power. Never mind Hitler's Third Reich: even in a democracy. Whatever 51% of the people decide becomes the norm, then policy, then law. That sounds comforting only to those extremely ignorant of history and human nature.

“These truths”—that God (not Government, not personal preference nor the will of 51% of the voters) is the source of “inalienable rights” is longer self-evident to a growing percentage of Americans. The entertainment industry, schools, universities, law schools, courtrooms and chambers of government at every level and are leading a very intentional campaign to banish God from public conversation. (For example, were you taught that the Supreme Court has stated what was, until extremely recently, obvious: “...the United States is a Christian nation.”? (The Church of the Holy Trinity vs. United States, 1892.) Did you know these basics of American political theory I am mentioning? If not, why not?) [As long as I'm digressing, maybe now's a good time to state what is also obvious: whether the Supreme Court was correct or not in declaring us “a Christian nation” and what that may or may not have to do with us today, the fact is that for all we have to be proud of, we as a nation have sinned horribly in several big areas: how we have treated Native Americans, how we permitted chattel slavery and racism for far too long, how we too often threw around our military might in unholy ways, how we have been irresponsible stewards of the natural environment which God has entrusted to us—to name a few. God will judge how our wholesale turning from Him will be reckoned among these sins.]

The founding document of our country declared independence from Great Britain—and at the same time it declared national dependence upon God (in its own words, “firm reliance on the Protection of divine Providence.”) The “Spirit of 1776” was one of great courage because it rested the fate of this nation upon trust in a great God—not a universal god, or a least common denominator god, or a generic god, belief in whom will offend no one—but the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God revealed in Jesus the Christ. (The initial prayer of the Continental Congress (the body which

composed and adopted the Declaration), delivered by the Rev. Jacob Duche on September 7, 1774, ended with the words “All this we ask in the name and through the merits of Jesus Christ, Thy Son and our Savior. Amen.”)

Although many wish and teach it had been otherwise, there can be no real doubt that the Christian faith has been the framework upon which this democratic republic has endured. God is being done away with in public discourse—just think what would happen if CdM HS had offered a prayer of invocation during the graduation ceremony a month ago, even to a generic god, even though 80% of the nation’s people and certainly more than half the taxpayers in this district identify ourselves as “Christian.” If the understanding of the founders is lost, and God is banished, there is no enduring basis for any freedom, for any “right.” All is but politics and power.

Please don’t misunderstand: I am not suggesting we need to be “a Christian nation”—(although polls make the matter of the beliefs of our citizens quite clear) and I am not suggesting the schools or governments ought to be in the business of leading us or our students in Christian prayer. I am grateful to be living in a land which welcomes and protects religious freedom for other faiths and no faith.)

What I am suggesting is that if ever we should lose our historic understanding that Christianity is the foundation of our life together, we risk losing almost every freedom enjoyed by almost every person. (It was also Chesterton who also observed that the “Melting Pot” which has been the United States would only survive as long as the Pot itself did not melt—the Pot of Christian self-understanding of our peoples and institutions.)

I am not alone in this concern. Regardless of denomination, regardless of whether they had given their lives to Jesus, for over four centuries our leaders recognized this danger. The very first written constitution, as we would now call it, drawn up by representatives of the people which embodied the modern democratic ideal was that governing the people of Connecticut—in 1639. It avers that the state owes its origin to “the wise disposition of the divine Providence” and that “the word of God” requires “an orderly and decent Government according to God” to “maintain the

liberty and purity of the Gospel.”

Rhode Island, under Rodger Williams, was the first commonwealth in modern history to incorporate religious freedom as the principle of its existence. Its 1663 charter states “No person within the said colony...shall in any wise be molested, punished... or called in question for any differences of opinion in matters of religion,...[but] fully have and enjoy his own judgments...in matters of religious concernments.” The Christian faith and worldview were understood to preserve individual liberties in a democratic republic even then.

American founders who were Christians developed the principles of freedom of religion (and no religion) in a spirit of faithfulness to God rather than a spirit of secularism—secularism being, “no God, or God shouldn’t count.” Even while the English in the 1650’s were debating whether the colonies should be Congregationalist or Presbyterian or Episcopalian, the colonists (later, of course, the Americans) were themselves becoming aware that in Christ there is and must be liberty of religious practice. (Never mind how the French were to approach the matter in the Reign of Terror of 1789, in which the guillotine was arbiter and the Church guilty.) Sir Henry Vane served under the British crown as Governor of Massachusetts; at that time he was already arguing that freedom of religious conscience was necessary to maintaining a Christian society, which was the goal of the Colonists: “By virtue then of this supreme law, sealed and confirmed in the blood of Christ unto all men...all magistrates are to fear and forebear intermeddling with giving rule or imposing in those matters [of religious and civil liberties].” These are the exact, quintessentially American sentiments which showed up more than a century later in Philadelphia in 1776 in the Declaration of Independence. [These facts and documents cited by Paul Johnson in “The Almost Chosen People,” published in the June/July 2006 issue of First Things.]

Time prohibits me from much further citing how the Christian faith is the only Pot able to hold the marvelous diversity of American peoples and cultures and religious creeds. The freedoms we have so long enjoyed and which have made Americans the envy of the world; the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” remain ours no longer than the consensus remains that these are bestowed by Almighty God

rather than by politicians or the electorate.

Thomas Jefferson said it better. So before I continue, I will let the engravings in some of the structures in Washington, D.C., including his, say what I have been trying to say thus far:

--in the Supreme Court: the Ten Commandments are inscribed on the wall over the head of the Chief Justice

--in the Capitol Building: "Preserve me, O God, for in Thee do I put my trust." (Psalm 16:1)

--in the Congressional Building; "In God We Trust."

--in the Lincoln Memorial (his own words): "As was said 3000 years ago, so it must still be said: 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

--in the Jefferson Memorial (his own words): "Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction that these liberties are the gift of God?"

(I don't want to sound like a stick-in-the mud or a sore loser. This trend has been developing for decades. I don't begrudge an atheist Party or any other Party that might come along one day and honestly win the national election. Fair is fair. But I want everyone to be clear that those freedoms—civic, political, religious—envisioned by our founders cannot and will not stand once the Christian consensus erodes away. And the fault will not be assigned to the atheists—but to Christ's Church which kept choosing to snooze.)

Ours would not be the first nation, nor we the first generation, to have taken for granted the blessings of God while overlooking the God who grants the blessings. This complacency is common—probably inevitable. It's exactly what was taking place in the Old Testament lesson we heard from Deuteronomy, some 3200 years ago. ("Take care that you all do not forget the LORD your God...[when things are going well and] you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them...and when your silver and gold is multiplied...then do not exalt yourselves, forgetting the LORD your God...do not say to yourselves, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' Instead, remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth." [Dt 8:11-18])

Long before the Declaration of Independence, our own Congregationalist religious ancestors in New England were undergoing a similar phenomenon. Most of you know the Puritans and Separatists fleeing England, beginning in 1620 on the Mayflower because they were being persecuted and imprisoned for practicing their religion according to their conscience, were the ones who became Congregationalists.

You probably also remember that those were the ones who had, to borrow a phrase, pledged "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" to each other in Christian covenant. The Mayflower Compact they freely composed and signed governing their life together in the Plymouth Colony had agreed "In the name of God, Amen...Having undertaken, for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith...do...solemnly combine ourselves together into a civil body politic..." and they meant this. More than half the adult signers of that agreement died during that first winter; but so seriously did they all take their faith, this covenant, and their mission from God that not a single one elected to return to England in April 1621 when the Mayflower returned home. To keep covenant with their "church" was more important to them than life itself here on earth.

But how could their children understand the hardship and desperate need, and the grace of God who brought that abundant harvest we now celebrate with Thanksgiving? The second generation had no memory of having been beaten or imprisoned back in England for the crime of meeting in someone's home for a Bible Study or prayer session; no memory of 10, 12, 15 weeks crossing the Atlantic in stormy seas in fetid conditions belowdecks; no memory of rooting for mussels in the sand or nuts or acorns in the dirt on their hands and knees because they were starving literally to death; no memory of living in crude tents or a hole in the ground in the dead of winter when the cold and damp and epidemic took one in two. How could they have had any memory of the sense of covenant, together in Christ, which kept looking to God for rescue, and which thanked God with overwhelming gratitude when blessings of abundance did come so richly?

Soon enough those tents became homes and the homestead of three acres became thirty. In that first generation the people of every new township would establish the new church first of all; the lawbooks

forbade the citizens from living beyond half a mile from the church building (“meetinghouse”). Soon enough that law seemed restrictive, and the children had forgotten why it seemed so important to those who had seen the hand of God bring them through.

The enigma of affluence about which Deuteronomy was warning so long ago was reasserting itself already in the Colonies in the 1630’s and ‘40’s. Even the first generation survivors tended to forget their covenant—when security now seems to be found in the overflow of crops and cattle and catch from the sea, and in the muskets and powder they kept on hand, that desperate urgency in prayer and dependency upon God tends to fade into ritual. “Let the others go to church; I don’t need that stuff.”

And what generation wishes its children to suffer such dire hardship? As those earliest settlers settled down and prospered, they taught their children what they had learned the hard way. In so doing they also began to sow the seeds of our American Yankee ethic of self-reliance and independence. Each time a woman showed her daughters how to churn butter, or how to card and spin wool from the sheep, she was in danger of telling her their home had everything they needed. Every time a father showed his sons what his own hands could do: clear the field of the trees, take out the rocks, plant the crops, aim the stock of the gun, chop the wood to make the beams and rafters and doors, shoe the horses...unless he was supremely careful, he was teaching his son he really didn’t need God or other people. (“I have done this myself: this is my homestead, my home, my team of horses, my doing...”)

My concern for the future of our beloved country is nothing new, though the stakes keep getting higher. Already back then the leaders were concerned. In 1702 the formidable Puritan/Congregationalist Cotton Mather lamented, “Religion begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”

[[William Bradford, who had crossed on the Mayflower and lived thru the worst privations, observed in 1632 how “No man now thought he could [survive] unless he had cattle and a great deal of land to keep them on; all were striving to increase their [herds], by which means they were scattered all over the bay quickly, and the town in which they had lived compactly till now was left in a short time almost desolate.” This

earliest urban sprawl saddened Bradford enough, but since he never forgot the Source of all their blessings, what saddened him even more had to do with Christ’s Church: “But the church must also [by this process] be divided, and those that had lived so long together in Christian comfort and fellowship must now part and suffer many divisions...And this, I fear, will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lord’s displeasure against them.” [from *The Light and the Glory*, p. 216]]

Puritan preacher John Danforth likewise mistrusted the affluence he saw all about him, because affluence so easily became the idol which allows people passively to ease away from dependence upon the living God. “To turn blessings into idols is the way to have [the blessings] clapped under a blast. If the Lord loves His people, He will deliver the weapons out of their hands, that they are obstinately resolved to fight Him with...Better is it that Israel be saved and prosperity loved, than that prosperity be saved and Israel lost.” [p 217]

It’s always a risky enterprise to try to ascribe effect to historical cause, and motive to God. Many of the people of that time, however, believed that indeed God did “clap New England under a blast.” Crops began to fail, weather patterns became unpredictable, shipping losses mounted, and epidemics came. In fact in 1670 the government of the commonwealth of Massachusetts launched a special investigation to try to discover why God was so afflicting the people with illness, famine, and commercial loss. Those preachers were pretty sure they knew.

Only God knows whether He agrees with their assessment: that national woe must inexorably follow when God’s people turn away, turn to idolatry in wealth or security or any other. But we do have the words of Jesus. (This time, He was speaking to those who had just chosen to follow Him—and my paraphrase) “I’m glad you have chosen to join My team, but the real issue is just beginning. You will know you have become My genuine disciples when you continue abiding in Me, when you continue living according to my teachings and my commands over the long haul. In the living of My Spirit and My new life in you, in Your ongoing obedience to Me—that’s how you will know true freedom. That’s how you will surely know what

you were created for, and your heart's true fulfillment. In disciplined obedience to Me you will be finally free—not the juvenile freedom which wants to throw off every constraint, every command, in order to hit the road and follow every whim and every hormonal desire and every curiosity and every whim and every appetite and every dream without fear of “judgment” and without negative consequence...such latitude is not freedom—it's simply overgrown childishness and it will lead you to a prison much harder to escape than the kind with iron bars and locks...

I'm sorry if this has sounded like a “downer” of a Fourth of July sermon. I hope my concerns for our country are misplaced and that “the best is yet to be.” I guess that's up to all of us: if maybe we have been taking for granted the Source of our American affluence and our freedoms and our rights, assuming they will be with us as long as the flag still waves, then now is a good time to take stock.

“If the Son [of God] makes you free, you will be free indeed.” [8:36]

basic bibliography relative to American religious history:

The Light and the Glory, Peter Marshall and David Manuel

Renewing the Soul of America, Charles Crismier

The Myth of Separation, David Barton

“The Almost Chosen People”, Paul Johnson (essay in “First Things”, June/July 2006)

John 8:31-36

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him, “If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do You mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”