



The Foundation of Freedom

How Protestant
Christianity Played
A Role in the
Creation of the
United States

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The true cause for liberation of the early colonial settlers has been debated upon for many, many years. While there are those who cite an implied separation of church and state in the United States Constitution, and for those who demonize our traditions and morals, there are those who maintain that the United States of America is in fact a Christian nation, whose laws and common morals are based upon biblical principles, and whose founders all held a belief in God. So which is it? Are we one nation under God, or are we a Godless nation? What our country has become is another subject entirely. However, it is with great certainty that I can attest that these, our United States, were founded by the great influence of Protestant Christianity; by the proclamation that freedom comes from God, and that God has set mankind free by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is our right to choose and establish a good and just government, one that only exists to preserve what God has given his people, and to defend it from those enemies who seek to put asunder what God has done. America's foundation is freedom, and the foundation of freedom was laid by evangelical ministers in the first Great Awakening.

The colonies were largely settled by Protestants. Conditions in Europe – even with the advent of the reforms of Martin Luther, King Henry VIII, and John Calvin – were less than

favorable for fostering these fledgling, separate institutions of faith. The Vatican, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, still had great influence over most of Europe's monarchs, with Spain and France being the stonewall Catholic societies. Sweden, Holland, Germany, Scotland and Great Britain's allegiance to the Vatican fell as the Protestant Reformation caught fire. Even though the established Roman church was losing ground, Protestants found new hope and a new home in the American colonies. With Jamestown and Boston being principle religious settlements, one can conclude that our roots of a nation are deeply entrenched in Christian soil. But the new ideas of the Reformation would flourish into a new light, and a new movement. Historian Thomas S. Kidd offers this:

The Great Awakening and the Seven Years' War forged a visceral bond among Protestantism, anti-Catholicism, and liberty. To many Americans who were Congregationalists or Anglicans, as well as those belonging to other denominations not sanctioned by the state, the overall Protestant faith represented spiritual and political freedom, whereas Catholicism, or what was called the spirit of popery, represented tyranny and bondage.¹

The Reformation that had begun in Germany, and spread throughout Europe, had definitely been upon the hearts of the colonists, and caused them to realize some of the tyrannical tactics of their European mother countries, most of which instated by or carried out by Catholicism. While Christianity's second major split (after the Great Schism which led to the creation of the Eastern Orthodox Church) was still in the process, something else was happening. With the printing press well in use by this time, and the Holy Bible translated and revised into widely available

¹ From "God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution" by Thomas S. Kidd

English versions, ministers and laity alike could read the scriptures for themselves and form their own opinions, and began to question what being a Christian really was.

By the 1720s, many pastors had begun to pray for “revivals,” or outpourings of the divine Holy Spirit, who would precipitate religious renewal and perhaps bring about the salvation of many souls. The Puritans and many other Protestants believed that every person needed personally to accept God’s offer of salvation in order to be forgiven of their sins and enter heaven when they died. As the revivalist movement began to emerge, many church leaders put increasing focus on the individual’s experience of salvation, or being “born again,” a transaction that Jesus had taught must happen for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God. Zealous new church leaders such as the British Anglican revivalist George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts, focused intensely on the idea of a new birth – for them, the only spiritual question that mattered. The preaching of the new birth led to the Great Awakening. (Kidd 21)

In addition to noted ministers of the day, early enlightenment era writers such as John Locke had their works being widely distributed among the colonists. This, too, made an influence both on the ministers and the laity.

MEN being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a

*community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it. This any number of men may do, because it injures not the freedom of the rest; they are left as they were in the liberty of the state of nature. When any number of men have so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic, wherein the majority have a right to act and conclude the rest.*²

With the religious fervor and renewal during the Great Awakening, ministers from New York to Virginia had the colonist's attention. There is no doubt in my mind that their words would play a vital role in the events of the coming years.

By this time, the colonies had several churches: Roman Catholics, Jews, Anglicans, Congregationalists (who descended from Puritans and Pilgrims), Quakers, Unitarians, Baptists, and Presbyterians (of Scottish-Calvinist descent), and undoubtedly, folks of independent practices of Protestant influence. One of the earliest recorded works of this time period where a minister brought politics into the pulpit was that of Samuel Davies, who wrote "The Curse of Cowardice" in 1758, which was to encourage colonial men to serve in what is now known as the Seven Years' War. George Whitfield – a charismatic English born-again Anglican separatist who preached that freedom came from God – and colonial Protestant Jonathan Edwards – who took to heart the works of John Locke, and preached hell fire and brimstone sermons calling for the end of the respect to monarchies – are largely credited with ushering in the Great Awakening.

² From "Second Treatise of Government" by John Locke

The ministers who preach long, rhetorical, and theologically sophisticated sermons were challenged by new figures like Whitefield, the electrifying young preacher from England, who began dramatically changing people's expectations of what churchgoing meant. He took his controversial, emotional preaching style out of the church buildings (from which he was often banned) and into the fields, where in his compelling perorations he directly told assembled throngs that they needed to be born again. In the colonies, Whitefield caused an unprecedented sensation, which was fueled by newspaper advertisements about his travels and by the widespread publication of his personal journals. (Kidd 21)

Although Whitefield is not as celebrated in our history as Jonathan Edwards is, it is clear that in the works I found that did mention him, that George Whitfield was an unsung hero of the cause for colonial liberation.

In a eulogy for Whitefield, Pastor Nathaniel Whitaker of Salem, Massachusetts, declared that Whitefield was "greatly concerned for the liberties of America, and under God it was in no small measure owing to him, that the Stamp Act, that first attack on our liberties in these colonies was repealed." ... in a larger sense, Whitaker undoubtedly meant that Whitefield had revived evangelical faith in America, and by definition, reviving Protestantism meant reviving liberty. (Kidd 34)

Other ministers, such as Jonathan Mayhew, also took part in rebuking Great Britain's treatment of the colonies. "In 1765 he spoke out against the Stamp Act, and published an influential Thanksgiving sermon, "The Snare Broken," following its repeal in 1766." (Warner 902) But no

rousing of a sermon could have been preached by any other minister than Jonathan Edwards who proclaimed:

Whose wrath it is: it is the wrath of the infinite God. If it were only the wrath of man, tho' it were of the most potent prince, it would comparatively little to be regarded. The wrath of kings is very much dreaded, especially of absolute monarchs, that have the possessions and lives of their subjects wholly in their power, to be disposed of at their mere will. Proverbs 20:2 'The fear of a King is as the roaring of a lion: whoso provoketh him to Anger, sinneth against his own Soul.' The subject that very much enrages an arbitrary prince, is liable to suffer the most extreme torments, that human art can invent or human power can inflict. But the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of Heaven and Earth: it is but little that they can do, when most enraged, and when they have exerted the utmost of their fury. All the kings of the Earth before God are as grasshoppers, they are nothing and less than nothing: both their love and their hatred is to be despised.³

Minister Samuel Cooke would take a page from Samuel Davies and be another minister on record to call upon men of the colonies to engage in war, but this time it was directly aimed at Great Britain.

³ From Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners In The Hands of An Angry God", featured in "American Sermons: From the Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr." by Michael Warner

As the Revolution approached Cooke became more outspoken in his opposition to British rule, and in April 1775 British troops looted his house during their retreat from Concord, stealing his wig and gown. Later in the war Cooke's parsonage became a hospital where he helped care for the wounded. ...The Violent Destroyed (1777), a sermon commemorating those killed Lexington in 1775 that identified the British with the Amalekites who waged war on Israel and called for armed resistance by the Americans.

(Warner 903)

Being the natural leaders they were, evangelical ministers found themselves apart of militias, and soon entering the colonial legislature, such as Dr. John Witherspoon. "A Presbyterian minister who had immigrated from Scotland, Witherspoon was the first clergyman to serve in the Continental Congress. His eloquent and persuasive preaching on behalf of America liberty had propelled him to Congress..." (Gragg 181) It was noted that Witherspoon was one of the new delegates from New Jersey who helped to make the move towards independence a unanimous vote. Our founders, from different backgrounds and different beliefs, all believed the separating themselves from the then world superpower was the will of God.

Much is written about our founders. Much of what is written is up for debate. But some of it leaves out certain elements, or leads focus on one aspect of this point in history. Truth be told, there was a lot going on, and a lot at stake in the colonies. Rod Gragg characterizes one of our founders, Samuel Adams, quite well:

What scenes he had witnessed: Stamp Act protests, rousing debates in the Massachusetts legislature, ministers preaching freedom from the pulpit, crowds crying, “No taxation without representation!”- and tons of tea spreading like brown ink in Boston Harbor.⁴

Portraits can be seen of the depicted scene of men bowing or kneeling in reverence to God as chaplains prayed during the sessions of the continental congress that lead to the vote of independence. Even Jacob Duché, a minister of the Church of England, offered prayers for the assembled continental congress:

To thee they have appealed for the righteousness of their Cause; to Thee do they look up, for that countenance & support which Thou alone canst give. Take them, therefore, Heavenly Father, under thy nurturing care: give them wisdom in council, valour in the field. Defeat the malicious designs of our cruel adversaries. Convince them of the unrighteousness of their cause. And if they persist in their sanguinary purposes, O! let the voice of thy unerring justice sounding in their hearts constrain them to drop the weapons of war from their enerved hands in the day of battle. (Gragg 12)

One can only imagine that as the battles rage on, that prayer and scripture would be a part of the message to colonial soldiers on the battlefield. “But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today’” (Exodus 14:13, NRSV)⁵ Noted 18th century scholar Patricia Bonomi would reflect on the founding of our country in a profound way.

⁴ From “Forged in Faith” by Rod Gragg

⁵ From “The Second Book of Moses Called THE EXODUS”. Holy Bible, NRSV

The philosophical foundation of Colonial American culture, law, and government was the Judeo-Christian worldview. It was also the flame of inspiration that fired the American quest for freedom. The common people of Colonial America and their leaders would soon establish a new nation, and it would be founded on an old Book – the Bible. (Gragg 13)

The preaching of Whitefield, Edwards, Mayhew, Cooke, and others, along with the Bible and the writings of John Locke helped to shape one of the most important documents of this time period.

POLITICAL POWER, then, I take to be a RIGHT of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the commonwealth from foreign injury; and all this only for the public good. (Locke)

So what was on the hearts and minds of our founders? “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galations 3:28, NRSV)⁶ One can see how these two different sources made their way into the argument of all arguments; the argument that was debated for days, and the argument for which votes were cast... again... and again... and again. Then finally, on July 4th, 1776, our founders unanimously declared:

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

⁶ From “The Epistle of Paul, the Apostle to the GALATIONS”. Holy Bible, NRSV

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.

(Jefferson)

The end of the Declaration of Independence notes that our founders had a “firm reliance on divine providence”. This is to say, it was God’s will and intervention for their cause.

John Adams wrote that Independence Day should be “commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.” (Gragg 182) From looking at our history as a nation, even in this minute time frame, we can see that a lot was at play here. However, we cannot doubt who championed the cause of freedom. We cannot doubt who championed the cause of independence. Our founders could only put their trust in God when signing the Declaration of Independence; they would live free in a liberated nation, or they would surely hang. It is evident that by both the fiery and also eloquent sermons of evangelical ministers that the colonists were inspired to not only devote their lives to God, but to revolt, to take arms, and to fight for what God has given them, which was freedom... for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom to live as God intended them to live, not compromised by a corrupt king, but rather, encouraged by a good and just government of the people.

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