

Preserving the Moral Foundation of the Constitution

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I marvel at all of the things that our good friends Steve and Bonnie Studdert undertake. The unlimited energy of Steve wears me out just to watch him. He is however, very good at putting others to work. I hope I do not disappoint Steve or you in the remarks I will share tonight.

I, along with you, have seen some dangerous drifts occur in our country that I believe would shock and even dishearten our inspired Founding Fathers who persevered through months of debate and compromise "in order to form a more perfect union." Although I have expressed some of these same concerns to others in the past, I feel they need to be reemphasized as often as possible.

George Washington was perhaps the first to use the word "miracle" in describing the drafting of our Constitution. In a letter to Lafayette written in February, 1788, he said: "It appears to me, then, little short of a miracle, that the delegates from so many different states (which states you know are also different from each other in their manners, circumstances, and prejudices) should unite in forming a system of national Government." (Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia*, p. xvii ,1966).

Few things endure 219 plus years. No other constitution has lasted so long. Nearly two-thirds of the world's national constitutions have been adopted or revised since 1970, and only 14 predate World War II. By these standards the Constitution of the United States has proved remarkably durable.

(See *National Forum*, "Why Celebrate the Constitution," Fall, 1984, p. 3)

President Brigham Young, the first governor of Utah, made this comment on Independence Day, 1854: "The general constitution of our country is good... for it was dictated by the invisible operations of the Almighty. He moved upon Columbus to launch forth upon the trackless

deep to discover the American continent; he moved upon the signers of the Declaration of Independence; and he moved upon Washington to fight and conquer, in the same way as he moved upon ancient and modern Prophets, each being inspired to accomplish the particular work he was called to perform in the times, seasons, and dispensations of the Almighty." (Speech given at the Salt Lake Tabernacle, July 4, 1854.)

Tonight, I speak to you as a concerned citizen and a deeply concerned religious leader. I will focus my comments on sixteen significant words found in the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

These words are simple and direct. Their message and meaning appear to be crystal clear. But through the years, presidents, Congress, and the courts have interpreted them in so many different ways that many people today have no sense of the perspective upon which they were based originally.

According to James Madison, often referred to as the father of the Constitution: "We have staked the whole future of American civilization not upon the power of the government – far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God."

George Washington agreed with his colleague. Said Washington: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." (Washington's Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, quoted in *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, James H. Hutson, Library of Congress, 1998, p. 80)

Nearly 100 years later, Abraham Lincoln responded to a question about which side God was on during the Civil War with this profound insight: "I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." (*Abraham Lincoln's Stories and Speeches*, J.B. McClure, ed., Chicago: Rhodes and McClure Publishing Company, 1896, p. 185-186)

Madison, Washington and Lincoln all understood that democracy cannot flourish in a moral vacuum, and that organized religion and individual religious faith play an important role in preserving and maintaining public morality.

Yet we find today that our government is succumbing to pressure to distance itself from God and religion. A simple constitutional prohibition of a state-sponsored church has evolved into court-ordered bans against (1) representations of the Ten Commandments on government buildings, (2) Christmas manger scenes on public property, (3) prayer at public meetings, and (4) now the prohibiting of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in our public schools because of the mention of God. Instead of seeking the "national morality" based on "religious principle" that Washington spoke of, many are actively seeking a blind standard of official amorality, with a total exclusion of the mention of God in the public square.

Such a standard of religious indifference or hostility is absolutely and unequivocally counter to the intention of those who designed our government. Do you think that mere chance placed the freedom to worship according to individual conscience among the first freedoms specified in the Bill of Rights? The Founding Fathers understood this country's spiritual heritage. They frequently declared that God's hand was upon this nation, and that He was working through them to create what Chesterton once called "a nation with the soul of a church." While they were influenced by history and their accumulated knowledge and learning, the single most influential reference source for their work on the Constitution was the Holy Bible.

The framers of our Constitution knew that a nation which keeps God's commandments and walks in His ways will prosper. They tried to lay a solid moral foundation for a society that could be so blessed. When the Founding Fathers wrote the First Amendment, they wrote that the church and the state were to be separate, independent entities, not to eliminate morality and God's law but to make sure that the power of government could never be used to silence religious expression or to persecute religious practice. Once again quoting George Washington: "If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution, framed in the convention where I had the honor to preside, might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it." (*Maxims of Washington*, New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1894, p. 370-371)

George Washington's farewell address is considered to be among the greatest political speeches ever given. In it he states: "Of all the habits and dispositions 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." (Washington's

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These men who forged a new nation, having pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to do so, were men of learning. America at that time was the most literate nation in the world, and Christianity was at the very center of its education system. 106 of the first 108 colleges in the United States were founded on religious principles. In commenting on the use of the Bible in the classroom, Thomas Jefferson stated: "I have always said, and always will say, that the studious perusal of the sacred volume will make us better citizens."

When James Russell Lowell was asked, "How long will the American republic endure?" he responded, "As long as the ideas of the men who founded it continue dominant." Unfortunately, significant changes have already occurred.

In recent years, the phrase separation of Church and State has become almost a fixture in legal rulings. A well-known author was discussing this with a United States Congressman. The congressman stated, "We know that religious values are important; we just cannot do anything about it."

"Why not?" inquired the author.

"Well, we just can't because of the separation of church and state. We cannot impose religious values in public affairs."

"Separation of church and state--where is that found?" asked the author.

"It's in the constitution," responded the congressman.

"No it is not."

"Yes it is."

Handing him a copy of the constitution, the author said, "Show me."

The congressman turned to the First Amendment and prepared to read it to the author. Suddenly he became hesitant and looked embarrassed. "I can't believe this," he exclaimed!

The First Amendment, the first of what is known as the Bill of Rights actually states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

An examination of the Congressional Records from June 7 to September 25, 1789, clearly shows that all the Founding Fathers wanted was to preclude the establishment by the Federal Government of one denomination as the official church to the exclusion of all others. Fisher Ames who is credited with providing the final wording of the First Amendment wrote an article for a national magazine in 1801 expressing concern that as more and more books were introduced into school classrooms, the Bible might someday be discarded. He warned that this should not be allowed to happen, stressing that the Bible was the source of sound morality and behavior in America. Clearly, the use of the Bible as a textbook did not violate Fisher Ames' views of the First Amendment and he was the Founding Father who provided the wording for that amendment.

The constitutional provisions relating to government and religion were not intended to control the religious rights of people. Rather, they were intended to expand them and eliminate the fear of government intrusion. These provisions were meant to separate religion and government so that religion would be independent. They drafted an article in the Bill of Rights to guarantee religious freedom from government as opposed to government freedom from religion.

In fact, the framers of the Constitution probably assumed that religious freedom would establish religion as a watchdog over government, and believed that free churches not only have the right to speak out on public moral issues, but they have the solemn obligation to do so. Religion represents society's conscience, and must speak out when government chooses a course that is contrary to the laws of God. To remove the influence of religion from public policy simply because some are uncomfortable with any degree of moral restraint is like the passenger on a sinking ship who removes his life jacket because it is restrictive and uncomfortable.

We live in a day of political and social unrest. People are beginning to understand that more money and new government programs do not solve the problems of disintegrating morality in our homes and communities.

I believe Washington would have been troubled to see a time when citizens are forbidden to pray in public meetings; when people claim that "you can't legislate morality," as if any law ever passed did not have at its heart some notion of right and wrong; when churches are called intruders when they speak out against public policy that is contrary to the commandments of God.

Indeed, some people now claim that the Founding Fathers' worst fear in connection with religion has been realized; that we have, in fact, a state-sponsored religion in America today. It exists in the form of an institutionally supported belief that morality is whatever a person wants it to be, and that freedom is derived from the ideas of man and not the laws of God. Many people adhere to this concept with religious zeal and fervor, and courts and legislatures tend to support it. The current attack on marriage between a man and a woman which is ordained of God is an example.

While you may think I am stretching the point a bit to say that amorality is the new state-sponsored religion, I believe you would agree that we do not have to look far to find horrifying evidence of rampant immorality that is permitted if not encouraged by our laws. From the plague of pornography to the devastation caused by addiction to drugs, illicit sex and gambling, wickedness rears its ugly head everywhere, often gaining its foothold in society by invoking the powers of constitutional privilege. We see a sad reality of contemporary life when many of the same people who defend the right of a pornographer to distribute exploitive films and photos would deny freedom of expression to people of faith because of an alleged fear of what might happen from religious influence on government or public meetings. While much of society has allowed gambling to wash over its communities, leaving broken families and individuals in its soul-destroying wake, it reserves its harshest ridicule for those who advocate obedience to God's commandments and uniform, inspired standards of right and wrong.

There are probably many reasons for the change in public attitudes toward religion. Certainly we've had too many wolves posing as shepherds, prompting a natural skepticism toward any who profess to represent God on earth. Of course the news media, which rarely report on the good things churches are doing in the world, almost never miss an opportunity to tell people when church members do wrong.

For that matter, when was the last time you saw religion or people of faith portrayed positively in any film or television program? For the most part Hollywood's attitude toward religion is typified by the expression of cartoon character Bart Simpson, whose meal-time grace consisted of these words: "Dear God, we pay for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." In fact, noted film critic Michael Medved accuses Hollywood of a deliberate attempt to undermine organized religion. According to Medved: "A war against standards leads logically and inevitably to hostility to religion, because it is religious faith that provides the ultimate basis for all standards." (Medved, Michael, "Popular Culture and the War Against Standards," Speech at Hillsdale College, November 18, 1990)

Upon all representatives of all churches rests the responsibility to defend with dignity and balance the Divine Hand of God in the establishment of our great country.

The buzz words "family values" are being incorporated in almost every politician's favorite 30-second sound bite. But what does that phrase really mean? Whose values are we going to embrace: The values of politicians? The values the media tell us we should cherish? The values of special interest groups and organizations? The values of rank-and-file Americans, as determined by scientific survey? The fact is, the values that made us great are, in reality, the commandments of God. They provide the foundation upon which our republic was built.

Samuel Adams, who is sometimes called the father of the American Revolution, wrote: "I thank God that I have lived to see my country independent and free. She may long enjoy her independence and freedom if she will. It depends upon her virtue." (Wells, *The Life of Samuel Adams*, 3:176)

That means it depends on us. If we would maintain the independence and freedom the Founding Fathers intended, we must work to preserve and protect the moral foundation upon which they built our government. We must stand boldly for righteousness and truth, and must defend the cause of honor, decency, and personal freedom espoused by Washington, Madison, Adams, Lincoln, and other leaders who acknowledged and loved God. Otherwise, we will find ourselves increasingly falling into the same predicament President Lincoln observed in 1863.

Said Lincoln: "We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have

forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too proud to pray to the God that made us!" (A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America, March 30, 1863, as cited in Richardson, "Messages and Papers of the Presidents," U.S. Congress, 1897, p 164-165).

Let us resolve to make our own families truly free by teaching them that God holds us all accountable. His laws are absolutes; breaking them brings misery and unhappiness; keeping them brings joy, happiness, and the blessings of heaven. Let us teach our families and others the importance of moral responsibility based on the laws of God. No nation or people that rejects God or His commandments can prosper or find happiness. History and the scriptures are filled with examples of nations that rejected God. Let us be wise and remember the source of our blessings and not be timid or apologetic in sharing this knowledge with others.

There is no better time than now to declare and embrace that our trust is in God, and that we will look to His commandments and teachings for values that will fortify and give direction to our families. Only these values can insure true happiness, lasting peace, and joy. May the Lord bless your service to the George Washington Center for Freedom and Understanding. Seek out our youth who need to understand and prepare for their role as future leaders to help America preserve the freedoms upon which our Founding Fathers established this great nation.

They need the spirit of the founder of our Church, the Prophet Joseph Smith when he said, "The aspirations and expectations of a virtuous people, environed with so wise, so liberal, so deep, so broad, and so high a charter of equal rights as appears in said Constitution, ought to be treated by those to whom the administration of the laws is entrusted with as much sanctity as the prayers of the Saints are treated in heaven." (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 7 vols. 6:198)

I encourage you to join with other like-minded organizations and unitedly teach our people and especially our youth the principles that they will need to know to protect and preserve this land of America now and for the generations yet to follow.

As you gather your families for Thanksgiving, I hope you will join together in a prayer of gratitude and thanks for the blessing of living in this great land of individual freedom — the United States of America. Let us pray for our leaders of today that they will seek divine guidance as did our Founding Fathers, in finding the right answers to our many challenges.