

"A New Israel?"

"Flee From Tyranny!"

Deuteronomy 5:1-7; Luke 18:9-17; Romans 3:10-12

This lengthy article [lengthy because there is an argument layed out for our consideration] serves as a foundation for the sermon I will preach in worship on July 7th. Here it serves as a contribution for my *From the Pastor's Desk*. It provides more details that are important to consider but which time constraints of worship didn't quite provide for.

How do we observe this great American holiday in a way that does not glorify America but glorifies God? At the same time, while not glorifying America, it seems appropriate that we celebrate the incredible thing we have and the incredible things God has done. I decided to take a look at our nation's history from a Christological point of view, of course.

A few weeks back someone posted a 2012 article entitled "The Soul of Liberty" from which I offer now a few brief excerpts. "In 2009, Iranian student revolutionaries demanded a secular government because they wanted to escape the tyranny of an Islamic (read "religious") state. But thirty years before that, in 1979, their revolutionary predecessors demanded an Islamic (read "religious") state because they wanted to escape the tyranny of a secular government." The question raised is of course, which is desirable, a secular state or a religious state? We must realize that there are only two options - religious rule or secular rule. Right?

"What, if anything," the article continues, "can restrain a state from turning tyrannical? Secular revolutions (e.g. the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, etc.) produced immeasurably more blood and tyranny than the 300 years of the Spanish Inquisition. And the Catholicism of the French did nothing to restrain the horrors of the secular Reign of Terror." Again, the question is raised, "Which is desirable, a secular state or a religious state, which is desirable, secular rule or religious rule?" The answer at the time of the American Revolution was, not all that surprisingly, "Neither!" But the problem is that both kinds of rule, historically, have been shown to unavoidably and inevitably always ending up in despotism, tyranny, and destruction. There wasn't a single historical example to which our Founders could turn that hadn't ended in disaster. The incredible, if not impossible, problem of winning of the Revolutionary War was followed by the next, seemingly impossible problem, "How do we govern ourselves and NOT end up just another social and political disaster in the dustbin of social experiments and ash heap of history?"

Their solution was as unheard of as it was divinely revealed and orchestrated. In essence, the form of government settled on by 1789 was a secular structure that was framed, guided, and sustained by the religious values of the Christian faith. Understand this: the form of government they proposed, and ultimately put in place, was one that did NOT establish a religion (Christian or otherwise), but which was founded on, and utterly dependent upon, not the church per se, but the very principles and ethics taught by the Christian faith and as found in the Bible. For electricians, it is like a diode, the particular electrical device that permits electricity to flow in one direction but not the other. In terms

of a sewing machine, it is like the thread that is stitched into a garment, by which the thread is injected into the material but which can never go back onto the bobbin or spool of thread from whence it came. For the farmer, it is like a hydraulic system check valve which allows oil to flow in only one direction. Without the value system of Christian ethics being employed, without Christian values and ethical oversight, without the involvement of these principles at every level of government, our Founders were utterly certain our nation would unavoidably and inevitably devolve into a strictly secular state, and thus end up like all the other failures of history. There is a single Christian doctrine that is critically foundational to understanding why our Founders crafted our form of governance as they did. To this doctrine we will turn shortly.

I wish to proceed with the following over view of our nation's early history as it is seen from several different, yet essentially the same, vantage points. The historical record reveals, with abundant clarity, that at several different points in our nation's early history our predecessors who came to the shores of North America did so with the sense that, in a particular way, they were "the New Israel."

If we remember the story of the Hebrew slaves as told in the book of Exodus, with nothing less than the power and providence of God at work, the Hebrew slaves were able to flee Egypt, the land of bondage, and subsequently were free to live and worship God as they desired and as the LORD showed them how. This incredibly powerful metaphor of slaves having escaped their hated captors was not lost on those who fled the European Continent in the early 1600's and indeed into the 1700's. Some early documents refer to the North American shores as "the New Canaan". The terrible tyrannies of 16th century Europe caused parts of Christendom to flee to Holland by the later years of that century and into the first decades of the 17th century. They moved on from there to America to escape the oppression and tyranny for a freedom they were utterly certain God would bless them with. This same early 17th century sense of being a New Israel was still alive during the colonial days of the 18th century. Sadly, the untenable oppression and perilous and scandalous tyranny of 17th century England was still alive in the 18th century. It was broadly understood and correlated to the Christian Scriptures that the colonists were, again, a New Israel, a people who had lived and suffered under cruel oppression and tyranny but now freed by God's mighty, omniscient, and omnipotent hand.

Is it any wonder that our nation's founders looked to the Christian Scriptures for structure, hope, consolation, and guidance. Let me suggest that it was not simply because Europe, the homeland from whence our founders came, was Christian (which it unequivocally was, however badly flawed) that our founders turned to Christian doctrine, but because the history of the people of God of the Bible fit so precisely with their circumstances. I have a number of books on this subject that provide substantive, verifiable, and irrefutable proof of what I claim here. The evidence is not only verifiable but overwhelming that the impetus for those folks coming to America's shores with this mind set and belief system stems from what they found in the Christian Scriptures. Literally, and in great detail, they found a framework for a qualitative and structural way of life

such that God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) 1) was honored and obeyed, 2) that tyranny and oppression was precluded as much as humanly possible, and thus 3) that our citizens would be able to live in a freedom unlike no people had ever been able since the days of Adam and Eve.

It has been said that there is nothing worse in the world than war. However, I believe that is mistaken. Few things are worse than war but there is one thing that is - oppression and tyranny. That is why the various people groups coming to America's shores over those two critical centuries relied on the vision of themselves as the New Israel - a people that God, himself, was setting free for the sake of 1) freedom itself, and 2) (and even more importantly) creating a people for God's own sovereign and divine purposes.

Let me note at this point that this is one truth that a majority of today's legal scholars, professors, educators, educational institutions, and even individual citizens of our country now view with a skeptical eye or outrightly reject it and tirelessly attempt to refute it. However, history and truth is history and truth regardless of what is now purported to be true. It is called "historical revisionism".

One of the key Scripture lessons for us this morning is the one I selected from Romans. To understand how our government, as an institution, and our Constitution, as our founding and central framing document, came to be drafted and arranged as they were, we first must come to terms with Romans 3:10-12. Let us consider it again. *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* (NIV) Let me simply say that if we in America, today no less than 1789 (the year of ratification of our Constitution), ignore this foundational doctrine or misunderstand its import, we do so to our peril.

Many Americans are aware of how our federal government is arranged - 3 distinct branches of government. Executive, legislative, and judicial. There are many in our land that understand more or less how these three branches work together. But what many people do not know is the core theological doctrine which predicates or presupposes this practical application. The framers were under no false illusion that "if only we select better qualified, more moral political leaders, then our nation would not become entrapped again and thus descend down the long and agonizing road to tyranny." Our founders were under no such false illusion. They realized that man IS NOT, and NEVER HAS BEEN, perfectible. It doesn't matter if you are king, queen, legislator, or judge; people are people and all people are corrupt. Every one! The kings and queens of not only England but around the world and across all history were all, in various ways and to different degrees, corrupt and utterly UNTRUSTWORTHY; but so it was with parliaments and other legislative bodies since time immemorial; and so it is with judges and courts. Who in 17th century England could ever begin to think he or she had the chance for a fair shake in court, and who could trust Parliament which had utterly failed them so often? And what about the power of the Church? Hadn't it become either impotent or corrupt, too?

It was not simply a stroke of master genius by which our federal government was finally framed (for it was indeed a stroke of master genius); it was a stroke of genius by the finger of God's hand and of God's Word given by God himself via the power of the Holy Spirit, and life, words, counsel, and the example of Jesus Christ which brought into existence the 3-branch form of governance we have. Executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch, with its respective and exclusive realm of power and influence, was a check and restraint against possible abuses of the other two. Rarely in our day do we ever hear this particular point, but the founders knew with perfect clarity and utter certainty that there was one, and only one, thing they could utterly depend upon (other than God's sovereignty of course) and that was man's depravity. No nation or people can ever be assured of a system of governance free from the manipulations and evil machinations of leaders that have destroyed nations, individual citizens, and social institutions across the millennia. Even those leaders and institutions which had shown themselves able to lead ably and morally at first, have always gone the way of depravity. As far as our founders could see it, the only shot we had at something historically different and unprecedented was this new experiment in self-governance. And it all depended upon beginning with a proper understanding of the depravity of man.

Thus, our historically unique and unprecedented form of federal governance begins with and depends on a proper understanding of the depravity of man. But that was not the end of the matter. That was merely the beginning point. It also was understood that simply drafting and instituting this new form of government, a system of checks and balances, was not and could not be enough. This founding system had to rest upon a single frame of reference in terms of ethics and morals. If any form of government, even a brilliantly designed 3-branched system like ours, begins on an even keel but is not founded on a single, proper moral and ethical foundation, that institution will, in time, falter and fail like all the others.

It is thus not coincidental but with great intentionality that I chose our OT and Gospel lessons. I cannot begin to list all the places in the story of our nation's founding, and in all the civic buildings (e.g. capital buildings, courthouses, and legislative chambers, etc.) where we find either the actual Biblical citations or actual verses that were depended upon so heavily in those founding centuries and events that inhabited them. The Ten Commandments were not merely ornamental or theoretical in nature, nor were they simple reference points; they were foundational ideological bricks. Over and over the moral teachings of Jesus were used foundationally to mortar the bricks of our governance and common life together. More than a few founders believed personally and spoke openly about the truth that even the best, most plausible, and most noble of forms of government, should they lack the substantive moral framework of the ethics of Jesus, said foundation would inevitably begin to crumble and, in the end, would return to historical dust and rubble.

I chose our Gospel lesson because I have seen the reference to the story of Jesus and the little children used and referred to over and over. Everything we do as a nation is for the benefit not only of ourselves but for our posterity. Not

only in the sense of our posterity, but that the simplicity of the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus are equal to the task of guiding us along the way. If a nation built on a moral and ethical governmental foundation, such as the Bible provides for, does not transmit that same foundational moral and ethical framework into the future, that nation will find itself in serious and terrible trouble.

I selected not only the portion of the story where Jesus blesses the little children but included the story immediately prior to it. Forget for the moment that one is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Consider them both for the moment simply as 2 human beings. There is no doubt that both are religious people - both have gone (in our lingo) to church to pray. There is no question that both are religious.

Our founders, who were very studied and knowledgeable about not only world history but, unavoidably, human history, understood clearly that even the most principled ruler or other person of governance, could become corrupt. It mattered not whether they were religious or irreligious, Pharisee or tax collector, king, queen, legislator, or judge or court. Corruption, spiritual and moral, is not simply a possibility but in various ways a certainty. God's Word provides for no other conclusion.

It is with great purpose and intentionality that our founders, and indeed a great many who were to follow them, specifically put in stone, as it were, the specific citation or actual words of the Ten Commandments, into an unknowable number of public institutional structures across our nation - court houses, capitol buildings, and legislative chambers, etc.

It is not incidental that the Ten Commandments are found in two critical places not simply in the text of the Bible but within the time line of the people of God.

The first place the Ten Commandments are found (Exodus 20) is at the point where the newly freed Hebrew slaves had to have some kind of governing framework that not only set the parameters for freedom but also set the parameters for restraint. This second set of parameters is not often spoken to - restraint. The Ten Commandments were meant to function as much, if not more so, in terms of restraint. The Ten Commandments were intended by God to not only establish that to which we are free, but simultaneously but to establish particular restraints upon us. The first listing of the Ten Commandments, again, is found in Exodus 20, the point at which the now newly freed slaves needed to know how to govern themselves.

The second listing is found in Deuteronomy 5. This setting was part of Moses' final 3 part sermon series delivered shortly before his death. It was a reminder of what they had been given as a newly formed people, a way of life they had promised to uphold and live by; it was also a reminder and warning that to water down, dismiss, or in any way obviate them was to not only court disaster but ultimately end in destruction, if not by God's hand, then surely at their own hand.

If the colonists had indeed fled tyranny, which they clearly had, and if they indeed were determined to head off any future tyranny, which they most certainly were, their colonies and those which would be added in the years to come, would

have to cling to and remain fixed on that which framed their exodus from European slavery and which framed their new way of life, their life of governance, their corporate life, and their lives as individuals and families.

There is no doubt that knowledge of our nation's founding such as I've outlined is on the decline. There is no doubt that this diminishing awareness and body of knowledge is due to our over all educational system having been egregiously overhauled, changed, and rewritten. Yet, it also is true that many across our nation are pushing back against removing the truth of our history from its rightful place - in the hearts, lives, and academic studies of your young people. In fact, there are many people of each present generation who are still standing for and vocally expressing not simply an outrage over the loss of our history's founding but are demonstrating their determination that this incredible heritage shall not be lost.

There are many of us who call ourselves by the name of Christ who pledge our ultimate allegiance to Christ and him alone. Failed, corrupted, and corruptible Christians we are, but no less than the agnostic, atheist, or person of any other religion. But, if I may be so bold as to speak for more than just myself, we are determined to live as God has given us freedom and restraint, determined to be restrained ourselves as we are determined to restrain evil in others. We do not give glory to America, but only to God. At the same time, we pledge our allegiance to our nation via the ethics and principles of God by which our nation and governance was founded. We do not rejoice in any supposed perfection of our nation, nor in any purported perfection of our system of governance. There is no perfect person or institution on this planet. But there is a superior way to govern and live. God has shown us the way, if only we live within it, hold on to it, and perpetuate it. To God be the glory! Amen.