

Born to Win

American Prophets

by Ronald L. Dart

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[.]

United States Declaration of Independence - July 4, 1776

You recognize those words, of course. I wish every American child had them committed to memory because they are among the most important words ever committed to writing by the pen of man.

This is the opening of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, and the thinking behind this document is at the core of the most fundamental liberties of man. And while many of the men who signed this document were slave owners, these same men set in motion the wheels that would bring an end to slavery in the civilized world. They tell us it was, in the main, the words of Thomas Jefferson, but the leadership of *all* the existing states put their signature on it, and it honestly reflected their values and their beliefs.

Perhaps the most stunning idea put forward in this Declaration is that men—all men—are *created* equal and that they are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable rights. I say “stunning”, but that’s only in the light of modern politics. To the men who signed this Declaration it was *obvious*—it was a self-evident fact—that men were *created* and were endowed with rights by *their Creator*. In other words, they believed in God and they considered God to be the guarantor of the liberties of man—including life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For these men, to speak of God as Creator was as natural as *breathing*, for they were *all* believers. One of the most interesting things about them, though, was they were not much inclined to sectarian religion. Perhaps there had been too much suffering at the hands of a state church for them to feel comfortable, in any way, with an established church—or maybe with any particular church at all. But the belief in God, now that was another matter. In the minds of the men (by far and away, the majority of them) who signed this Declaration, the belief in God was beyond question in their minds.

Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, who became the second president of the United States, said this:

A patriot without religion in my estimation is as great a paradox, as an honest Man without the fear of God. Is it possible that he whom no moral obligations bind, can have any real Good Will towards Man[?]

Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren - November 5, 1775

What she is saying simply is that a belief in God, a belief in the Law of God, and the fear of God, lie at the root of the moral structure of men. And when they don't have that, they don't have anything to fall back on. Adams saw something that is strangely absent today. She saw religion as the *source* of man's moral obligations. Our schools now, since they can only advance the ethics approved by the state and not by God, are like, in Adams' words, "an honest man without the fear of God."

Is that what we really want? I know we want a separation of church and state, but do we really want an educational system that advances only the values that the *state* approves? We are in grave danger in this country of having the state become a religion in its own right. And since it is the state, it would be an established religion in spite of everything. The only saving grace for it would be if it was not *called* a religion or *called* a church. I ask if that is what we really want because *we are* the government here—or, at least, we are *so far*.

I want to pull together for you some remarks of John Adams on the Constitution of the United States. These are not necessarily all in the order he gave them, but he said these things about the Constitution. He said (and I quote):

Because We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition, Revenge or Galantry, would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other

John Adams to Massachusetts Militia - October 11, 1798

And as we, day by day, become a less moral and religious people, our Constitution becomes increasingly inadequate to the task. I don't think many of us remember that it is our Creator that guarantees our rights, not the government—that those rights are granted to us by our Creator, by God, not by the government. And if we forget that Creator, we are a people who find ourselves unable to govern ourselves, and only able to be governed by *armed power*. Avarice, ambition, revenge, and even gallantry are cutting through our Constitution day by day as we watch.

John Adams wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson. In the letter, he said this things:

[...H]ave you ever found in history one single example of a Nation throughly Corrupted — that was afterwards restored to Virtue—and without Virtue, there can be no political Liberty. [...] Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry— Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury—Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy intoxication extravagance Vice and folly.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson - December 21, 1819

Adams was a *deeply* religious man and his words ring like a prophet. (Not surprising, in a way, in a man who read his Bible regularly.) His son, John Quincy Adams, made the point of telling his son in turn:

I advise you, my son, in whatever you read, and most of all in reading the Bible, to remember that it is for the purpose of making you wiser and more virtuous. I have myself, for many years, made it a practice to read through the Bible once every year. [...] My custom is, to read four or five chapters every morning, immediately after rising from my bed.

John Quincy Adams to George Washington Adams - September, 1811

Now, if you think about Adams' words in the light of history, you will know he was true, he was right—that once a nation has become thoroughly corrupted they can no longer govern themselves and must, in the natural course of events, *lose their liberties*. And many people see, looking around our country today, more and more the people of this country are willing to lay down their liberties for ease, for safety, for protection from the government.

Another great name in our history is Ben Franklin. Speaking in the assembled Congress in 1787, Ben Franklin had this to say:

I've 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 the House they labor in vain who build it.
[*Psalm 127:1*]

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 become a Reproach and Bye word down to future Ages. And, what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war, or conquest.

I therefore beg leave to move -- that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the Clergy of this City be requested to officiate in that service.

Benjamin Franklin - Speech to the Constitutional Convention - June 28, 1787

Here was a man who understood the stakes he was playing for, and he recognized that the freedom of the entire world depended, in the end, on the freedom of the United States. By some miracle our Congress still continues this practice of prayer (although we do not allow it in the schools). But Franklin was right and nothing has changed, “without [God's] 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 become a reproach and bye word down to future ages.” He sounds like a prophet.

Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!

*Patrick Henry - Speech at the Second Virginia Convention, St. John's Church, Richmond -
March 23, 1775*

Every schoolboy knows the words of Patrick Henry. He was speaking on March 23, 1775. And I wonder how many schoolboys know that he said what I'm about to read to you:

This is all the Inheritance I can give to my dear family, The religion of Christ can give them one which will make them rich indeed[.]

Last Will and Testament of Patrick Henry - 1798

Years later, someone writing of this quote said:

It cannot be emphasized too clearly and too often that this nation was founded, not by "religionists", but by Christians—not on religion, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For this very reason, peoples of other faiths have been afforded asylum, prosperity, and freedom of worship here. In the spoken and written words of our noble founders and forefathers, we find symbolic expressions of their Christian faith. The above quotation from the will of Patrick Henry is a notable example.

The Virginian - April 1956, Vol. II No. 3

Think about what this is saying. Nobody else did this; it was Christians. It wasn't religionists; it was people who followed the Gospel of Jesus Christ—who believed in the Bible, simply—plainly and simply believed in the Bible and followed the teachings of Jesus. It was out of the teachings of Jesus that freedom sprang. It was *because* of Christian principles, of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is because of this reason that people who are of *other* faiths can find asylum, prosperity, and freedom of worship here. Of the Bible, Patrick Henry was also attributed as saying:

Here is a book worth more than all the other books that were ever printed[.]

William Wirt Henry - Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence, and Speeches (1891)

Bad men cannot make good citizens. A vitiated state of morals, a corrupted public conscience, is incompatible with freedom. It is when a people forget God that tyrants forge their chains.

attributed to Patrick Henry

Where did Patrick Henry get his ideas? What informed his conscience? Well, the Bible. What else?

Now, the man who actually wrote the verbiage of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, had some interesting thing to say, sort of along the same lines. Thomas Jefferson said:

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever[.]

Thomas Jefferson - Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII, "Manners"

To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed, opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others[.]

Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush - April 21, 1803

I consider the doctrines of Jesus as delivered by himself to contain the outlines of the sublimest system of morality that has ever been taught but I hold in the most profound detestation and execration the corruptions of it which have been invented[....]

Thomas Jefferson to Henry Fry - June 17, 1804

Whew! Strong words. A strong rejection of a corrupted Christianity which he saw around him in very many places. And even in his own day, he was very concerned about what a just God might do when he awoke and looked upon his nation. Of the gospel of Jesus, Thomas Jefferson said:

[A] more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen. it is a document in proof that I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus[.]

Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson - January 9, 1816

This man is the man who wrote that “all men are *created* equal” and are “endowed by the *Creator* with certain unalienable rights”. The Bible really lays at the roots of the ethical system, the moral system, the general guidance of conscience of many of the men who founded this country. William Penn, who was the founder of Pennsylvania, who turns out to read very much also like a prophet, said this:

If thou wouldst rule well, thou must rule for God; and to do that, thou must be ruled by him[....]

William Penn to Peter I of Russia - July 2, 1698

Those who will not be governed by God will be ruled by tyrants.

attributed to William Penn

I think William Penn and the others saw this as inevitable, that whenever a man gives up on God, when a man rejects the power and the authority of God, he is left with nothing except the power and the authority of *men*. And as Lord Acton said:

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton to Mandell Creighton - April 5, 1887

And the problem with men is: when they've had no change, no limitations, when they have no God, when they have no higher power to whom they owe allegiance, only owe allegiance only to their own lusts, their own desires, their own wants. George Washington didn't say as much about religion as some

of the others (although he did say that it's impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible). But he said something else, something very chilling. He said:

Government is not reason, it is not eloquence,—it is force! Like fire, it is a dangerous servant, and a fearful master[...]

attributed to George Washington - The Christian Science Journal, Vol. XX, No. 8 - November, 1902

You will never read a more telling commentary about government than those words of the father of our country. “Government is not reason, it is not eloquence,—it is force! Like fire, it is a dangerous servant, and a fearful master.” And I get the distinct feeling, in the modern world, that we have *forgotten that*—that somehow we think maybe government is reason, maybe it is eloquence. No! The only thing that government has is *force*, and when a people are not governed by morals, when people are not governed by God, when they are not self-governed, there is nothing left to use but *raw force*.

Daniel Webster is a name familiar to all of us from the days of the founding fathers. And Daniel Webster said:

Hold on, my friends, to the Constitution of your country and the government established under it.

Daniel Webster to Dr. William B. Gooch - 1851

We live under the only government that ever existed, which was formed by the deliberate consultations of the people. Miracles do not cluster. That which has happened but once in six thousand years, cannot be expected to happen often. Such a government, once destroyed, would have a void to be filled, perhaps for centuries, with evolution and tumult, riot and despotism.

Daniel Webster - Speech in Concord, Massachusetts - 1805

He realized that this document that they were putting together—the Constitution of the United States—the very founding ideas of this country, were a miracle. And it had only happened once in 6,000 years of human history and may never happen again. “Hold on” to the Constitution, for if the American Constitution should fail, there will be anarchy throughout the world. What did he see? What was he looking for? Well, he said:

[I]f we, and our posterity, shall be true to the Christian religion, if we and they shall live always in the fear of God, and shall respect his commandments, if we, and they, shall maintain just, moral sentiments [...our country] will go on prospering and to prosper. But, if we and our posterity reject religious instruction and authority, violate the rules of eternal justice, trifle with the injunctions of morality, and recklessly destroy the political constitution, which holds us together, no man can tell, how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us, that should bury all our glory in profound obscurity.

Daniel Webster - Speech to the New York Historical Society - February 23, 1852

Finally, let us not forget the religious character of our origin. Our fathers were brought hither by their high veneration for the Christian religion. They journeyed by its light, and labored in its hope. They sought to incorporate its principles with the elements of their society, and to diffuse its influence through all their institutions, civil political or literary. Let us cherish these sentiments and extend this influence still more widely—in full conviction that it is the happiest society which partakes in the highest degree of the mild and peaceful spirit of Christianity.

Daniel Webster - Plymouth Oration - December 22, 1820

God grants liberty only to those who love it and are always ready to guard and defend it. The hand that destroys the Constitution rends our Union asunder forever.

Daniel Webster - Speech - April 29, 1837

Thus said Daniel Webster.

Noah Webster has been called the father of public education in America and it's really interesting to go back and read this man's words in the light of what is going on right now in public education in America. He declared that government was responsible to "discipline our youth in early life in sound maxims of moral, political, and religious duties." He declared that "Education is useless without the Bible." He said that the Bible was "America's basic text book in all fields." He said that:

God's Word, contained in the Bible, has furnished all necessary rules to direct our conduct.

Noah Webster - The Teacher: A Supplement to the Elementary Spelling Book

Further, he said:

In my view, the Christian religion is the most important and one of the first things in which all children, under a free government ought to be instructed [...] No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people.

Noah Webster - American Dictionary of the English Language, Preface

In 1832, Noah Webster, in his *History of the United States*, wrote:

The brief exposition of the constitution of the United States will unfold to young persons the principles of republican government; and it is the sincere desire of the writer that our citizens should early understand that the genuine source of correct republican principles is the BIBLE, particularly the New Testament, or the christian religion.

Noah Webster - History of the United States

Continuing to quote now from Noah Webster, the father of public education in this country:

[...T]he religion which has introduced civil liberty, is the religion of Christ and his apostles, which enjoins humility, piety and benevolence; which acknowledges in every person a brother, or a sister, and a citizen with equal rights. This is genuine christianity, and to this we owe our free constitutions of government.

[...]

[...T]he moral principles and precepts contained in the scriptures ought to form the basis of all our civil constitutions and laws. [...] All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.

[...]

When you become entitled to exercise the right of voting for public officers, let it be impressed on your mind that God commands you to choose for rulers, *just men who will rule in the fear of God*. The preservation of a republican government depends on the faithful discharge of this duty;

Noah Webster - History of the United States

It's really striking, all these generations later, looking back on this man, to see how *prophetic* his words are, because he continued to say this:

[I]f the citizens neglect their duty and place unprincipled men in office, the government will soon be corrupted; laws will be made not for the public good, so much as for selfish or local purposes; corrupt or incompetent men will be appointed to execute the laws; the public revenues will be squandered on unworthy men; and the rights of the citizens will be violated or disregarded. If a republican government fails to secure public prosperity and happiness, it must be because the citizens neglect the divine commands, and elect bad men to make and administer the laws.

Noah Webster - History of the United States

Corruption of morals is rapid enough in any country, without a bounty from government. And [...] the Chief Magistrate of the United States, should be the last man to accelerate its progress.

Noah Webster - An Address to the President of the United States on the Subject of His Administration

It's staggering, isn't it, to read what these old, wise men who founded our country had to say. They were the Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, and Zechariah of their day. When I read their words, I can't help but recall what Thomas Jefferson said:

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever[.]

Thomas Jefferson - Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII, "Manners"

And then, when you read John Adams' letter to Thomas Jefferson where he said:

[...H]ave you ever found in history one single example of a Nation throughly Corrupted — that was afterwards restored to Virtue[?]

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson - December 21, 1819

There *is* hope, but it doesn't lie with us.

When I was a child, I knew nothing of Independence Day. I only knew about the 4th of July. It was a holiday with fireworks and hot dogs and watermelon and picnics and games. Later in life, I grew to understand what it *means* to be free and what a *terrible* price has been paid to gain our freedom, and what a price we must *still pay*. This Independence Day, spare a thought for what the day *really meant* to the men who made it *happen*. They were winners. They were *born to win!*

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

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