

**Sermon Study Guide Based on
Pastor Weber's Message of June 21, 2009
"American Christianity – How We Got Here (Part 1)"**

[This message focuses on the founding principles and documents upon which our nation was founded and how that projects out for our future.]

[Topics: Founding Fathers; Religious Foundation; Puritans; pre-millennialism; post-millennialism]

Excerpt: On this Father's Day, 2009, I would like to take us back in time to the Founding Fathers of our nation, as opposed to us who are fathers here and now. We're going to look at our first European settlers and to the founding principles and documents upon which our nation has been built. And it's going to take two weeks to do this.

Hopefully we will see how the history of our nation and its religion has impacted our country and even impacts us today and how that will project into the future. We're going to start back in the 1600s and work our way through the early 1800s.

The reason for this 2-part series has been prompted by the growing controversy of whether or not our nation is a Christian nation. There are rather adamant arguments on both sides of this issue. Of course, very strong Christians trace the history of religion and the beliefs of the Founding Fathers and conclusively conclude that our nation was founded as a Christian nation, always was a Christian nation, and always should be a Christian nation.

On the other hand, there's a secular side that says that you really don't understand what happened, who are Founding Fathers were, what they said and what they meant. These are strong advocates of the separation of church and state and say that we cannot claim that our country is a Christian nation.

Many were shocked when President Obama said in a plain simple statement that the United States is NOT a Christian nation. He said this in the context of the plurality of cultures and the various ethnic groups within our nation. We'll cover some of this so that you will be able to carry on a more intelligent conversation with others concerning these topics.

And as we study the way churches and preachers were in the early part of our history, we need to be cautious as to whether we want to return back to those conditions. Some of the conservative Christian leaders want to get us back to the way it was in the Christian Church in the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s. But few understand the history of religion in America, because it's not taught in our schools today. We'll examine what took place in the churches between the 1650s and 1750s in America.

We often think of the Pilgrims as part of the founding people in America. Many dress up on Thanksgiving Day like quaint Pilgrims with square toed shoes, buckles and funny little hats and bonnets. These were very religious people and we view them as harmless. We'll talk more about the Pilgrims and their religious beliefs and influence later in this message.

Let's first look at some of the religious statements made by some of our most famous Founding Fathers. What did they have to say about religion and God? We'll start with the most famous of our Founding Fathers, George Washington.

Early in Washington's presidency, at the request of congress, he issued our first official national thanksgiving proclamation in 1789. The proclamation was sent to the governors of the each of the states.

"To the people of these states" devote themselves in service to "that great and glorious being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be." It exhorts the people in the young country to express their gratitude to God for his protection of them through the revolutionary war and the peace they had experienced since.

And for allowing the constitution to be composed in a "peaceable and rational manner"; for the "civil and religious liberty" they possessed; and "in general, he prayed for and encouraged prayers for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us."

So it would be impossible to take the religious thought process out of the mind and sayings of George Washington. He certainly had a relationship with God. He talked about God. He was a man of prayer to God. Here's another one of his quotes.

Without the beneficial interposition of the supreme ruler of the universe, we could not have reached the distinguished situation, which we have attained with such unprecedented rapidity. To Him, therefore, should we bow with gratitude and reverence, and endeavor to merit a continuance of his special favors".

He also said, *"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and Bible."* It's important to remember that George Washington many times asked for God's blessing on this country. It's important not to gloss over this.

During his first inauguration, Washington took the oath as prescribed by the constitution but added several religious components to that official ceremony. Before taking his oath of office, he summoned a Bible on which to take the oath and added these words "so help me God!" to the end of the oath. Then he leaned over and kissed the Bible.

When Barack Obama was inaugurated as President a few months ago, he used the Lincoln Bible, because of its historic value.

Benjamin Franklin is another one of our well-known forefathers. He, too, made many religious statements.

God governs in the affairs of man. 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 in the sacred writings that except the lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this.

He also said this while we were framing the constitution after the Revolutionary War. *I also believe that, without his concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel.*

Now our Founding Fathers and the Continental Congress were bogged down about the constitution. There was a lot of contention. It was going nowhere. Then Ben Franklin intervened with this statement.

In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered... do we imagine we no longer need his assistance? [Constitutional convention, Thursday June 28, 1787]

After this Franklin asked for a dismissal of the group so they could spend time in prayer and then come back together again. They did. And when they came back together, they hammered out probably one of the greatest, if not the greatest, secular document in the history of the world – the constitution of the United States of America. This was only accomplished after Ben Franklin rallied them to prayer seeking God's intervention.

John Hancock was the first of the original signers of the constitution. You see his legible handwriting on many of the replicas. We use his name today in the saying: "Well, I'm going to put my John Hancock on that. John Hancock said this:

In circumstances as dark as these, it becomes us, as men and Christians, to reflect that whilst every prudent measure should be taken to ward off the impending judgments, ...at the same time all confidence must be withheld from the means we use; and reposed only on that God rules in the armies of heaven, and without his whole blessing, the best human counsels are but foolishness.

On a day of fasting, John Hancock wrote this:

Resolved ...on the 11th of May...to humble themselves before God under the heavy judgments felt and feared, to confess the sins that have deserved them, to implore the forgiveness of all our transgressions, and a spirit of repentance and reformation ...and a blessing on the ... union of the American colonies in defense of their rights [for which hitherto we desire to thank almighty God.

It's interesting to note that many of our Founding Fathers called for days of fasting and prayer, days of thanksgiving and adjournment of meetings so that praying and the seeking of God's intervention might be accomplished.

Noah Webster is a famous name in our American history. Webster is famous for the high school dictionary we carried around with us. He said on one occasion:

The duties of men are summarily comprised in the ten commandments, consisting of two tables; one comprehending the duties which we owe immediately to God -- the other, the duties we owe to our fellow men.

On another occasion Noah Webster 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.

Imagine those words coming out of a politician today that Christianity should be taught in all the public schools? It's simply unthinkable. It isn't done in our society today.

We come to John Adams, our second president. He said:

The general principles upon which the fathers achieved independence were the general principals of Christianity... I will avow that I believed and now believe that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God.

John Adams thought that the 4th of July celebration ought to be a day of religious festivity. Today, the 4th of July is a day we explode fireworks and cook hamburgers. Christians will of course ask a blessing over the meal that day and give God thanks for our freedoms. We need to do that every 4th of July.

John Adams further said:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, 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.

You probably will never hear a modern politician say that. John Adams further said:

I have examined all religions, as well as my narrow sphere, my straightened means, and my busy life, would allow; and the result is that the Bible is the best book in the world. It contains more philosophy than all the libraries I have seen.

And then in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Adams wrote: *Without religion this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company.*

These are pretty strong statements. Now let's look at some of the religious statements Thomas Jefferson made.

God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are a gift from God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that his justice cannot sleep forever.

These excerpts are inscribed on the walls of the Jefferson memorial in Washington, DC. He also said these three statements:

The doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend to all the happiness of man.

Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern, which have come under my observation, none appears to me so pure as that of Jesus.

I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus.

Now hold that thought when we come back to the life of Thomas Jefferson. Now we could spend a whole college semester reviewing the religious thoughts of our Founding Fathers, but that should suffice for now. Ron Kelly hopes that he has demonstrated this point that

the history of our nation has been influenced by religious people and by religious thoughts and religious philosophies.

On January 20, the 44th president of the United States was sworn into office. It was a truly historic event – Barak Obama became the first US African American president.

His campaign, nomination and presidency have been the source of countless hours of evaluation, concern, excitement, controversy, and a thousand other adjectives that could be used to describe this momentous occasion.

To many, the election of an African American President at least partially relieved the disgrace of more than 300 years of prejudice, bigotry and injustice. But to a number of extreme right wing people, they see the election of Obama as a curse upon our nation.

The day after the election, Ron Kelly received an email from a person he has know and respected for over 50 years. She wrote: “The election of Barak Obama demonstrates God has removed his blessings from America and will now punish the country for its many sins.”

Mr. Kelly couldn't help grown in agony over this kind of thought process. We may not all agree with all of the policies of the administration in power or what the President does or says, but do we have to go down this far-right wing road?

One of the Christian radio's popular talk show hosts had a caller asked him just a few says after the election, “Do you think Barak Obama is the antichrist?”

The host didn't really answer that question and tried to be a bit evasive. But he did say that his program had received **thousands** of emails and phone calls of a similar nature. So there is a radical element out there looking at current conditions.

And there are a certain number of evangelical Christians who are looking to return to the roots of our Founding Fathers and the early American colonists of the 1600s. They want to get back to that “pure, unadulterated religion.” Many think we, as a country, would be much better off. Mr. Kelly believes this thinking is based on incorrect knowledge and emotion without perhaps a true understanding of what took place at the beginning of our country.

So, how should we, as Christians, react to the current political situation? To Barak Obama? To the cabinet he is putting into place? To the new policies enacted? What is our responsibility? We'll talk about this later.

These are truly historic times and the election of Barak Obama is a major historic milestone in our country. That's why we need to understand some of the background and history of our nation's religion and politics.

Now, we all remember from our American history classes, the journey of the pilgrims from Europe to the New World. We have pictures in our minds of these brave people crossing the Atlantic Ocean, braving those storms, seasickness, and in many cases death on board.

During their first few years, they experience horrible winters trying to eek out an existence and fighting with the Indian tribes already here. Most of these pilgrims came for religious reasons and to escape persecution in England and Holland. Even though the great

Protestant Reformation had occurred, you still had Protestant majorities persecute minorities the same way the Catholic majority had persecuted the minorities centuries before.

The dominant religious denomination in early colonial America was the Puritans. They were called Puritans because they believed they were getting back to the “pure religion.” They believed that religious organizations had become corrupt. And so they were out to “purify” them. In return the Lutheran, Presbyterian and Anglican churches were troublesome to them.

And so between 1620 and 1640, an immigration of these people was underway to the New World. It's called in history would later be called the “great migration.” The Puritans didn't come to America solely to escape religious persecution, although it was a prime motivating factor.

They came also seeking a “new world.” They regarded themselves as the only true Christians and had disdain for other religious groups – especially Catholics, Jews, Quakers, and even Presbyterians. Later on Baptists, Methodists, and Unitarians were persecuted by the Puritans. It wasn't a pretty scene when the Puritans became the dominant religious group in the colonies.

Now the Puritans are the original founding name of what we call today the denomination of “Congregationalists.” But the philosophy of the Congregationalist church is different from that of the Puritan church of the 1600s. But that's their history. And all churches have a history. Some of it's good and some of it not so good.

The Puritans came to the New World to establish churches. And in order to participate in the activities in that colony you had to be a member of that church. They saw themselves as the new Israel. They could see themselves leaving the captivity of Egypt (that is Europe), coming across the sea (that is the Red Sea), and establishing God's nation in the New World just like the Children of Israel did. This was a parallel thought often discussed in their beliefs.

They saw themselves as the new Israel and felt the colonization of the New World was a “Manifest Destiny.” It was God's will, God's desire for them to be there. And when they became in control of the colony, the church was the state, just like it had been in Catholic Europe centuries before and like Anglican England after the days of Henry VIII.

The Puritans controlled everything. In order to vote, you had to be a baptized member of the church. Now also many among them believed that the millennium reign of Jesus Christ would commence here in America. The Puritans thought felt they could win the New World for Christ and face down the devil.

One of their famed preachers Lyman Beecher preached about it in his sermon. *This nation is, in the providence of God, destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world... The government of force will cease, and that of intelligence and virtue will take its place; and nation after nation, cheered by our example, will follow our footsteps till the whole earth is free.*

Now this doctrine is called post-millennialism. Now it's not adhered to by many in the modern Christian world. But it was the dominant theology in the period of colonial America. It's the belief that the world will get better and better and that Christianity will expand and expand until the majority of people will be converted and that will make the world prepared for the

return of Jesus Christ. Post-millennialism means that Jesus returns after the Millennium has been established.

Now what has become more popular today is called pre-millennialism. It got started in the mid 1800s by a British preacher by the name of James Darby when he began to preach what is called Dispensationalism. Darby divided the history of the world into segments and we move from one to the other until we come to the “end times” where prophecies are being fulfilled when the world goes into those last throes of Satan’s rebellion with Jesus coming after the Great Tribulation to usher in the Millennium.

This is the traditional modern evangelical approach and probably most of us in this congregation go along with this belief. But the Puritans believed in post-millennialism as we’ve shown.

Now in order for the Puritans to keep their religion pure and to keep heretics out of the church, they had to establish a university. So in 1636, Harvard University in Boston, Mass. was founded as the first American institution of higher learning. It was founded to establish a Puritan ministry.

You don’t think of Harvard today as a training ground for ministers. Now Harvard has a school of theology today, but it’s a pretty liberal school of theology. The clergy of colonial America were highly educated. They came from the great institutions of Europe where they obtained PHD degrees or Masters of Theology degrees. They were astute in the Greek and Hebrew languages. And likewise Harvard began as a great American university. The Puritans, as a whole, were a highly educated group of people.

Henry Dunster, Harvard’s first president, was highly regarded, respected and admired in virtually all communities. But he was forced to resign by the board of directors after he was president for almost 20 years. The reason? He would not baptize his infant son. He had come to believe the anti-baptist doctrine that baptism was for a more mature adult. The doctrine is called antipeaedobaptis – a nice Latin term. This reason sounds absurd. But that’s how strong the Puritan influence was.

A few years after the establishment of Harvard, one of the Board of Directors of Harvard began a book collection of library books with the thought in mind that he wanted to establish another university in the colonies. After about 50-60 years, he saw Harvard becoming too liberal. This ultimately led to the founding of Yale University in Connecticut in 1701. Other religious universities were established there in colonies such as Brown, Princeton, and others.

Now before we close for today, let’s discuss one interesting early person. Her name is Ann Hutchinson. She is profiled in many college classes because she is one of the if not the earliest women’s activists. She was a prominent Boston patron. Now the church she attended considered her “sinful.” And subsequently had her banished.

So what was her sin? She was holding meetings with other ladies after church to talk about the sermon that had just been delivered. And sometimes they didn’t like the sermon and criticized it.

She also believed that her Puritan church put too much emphasis on good works and not enough emphasis on grace. So she was brought before the church board by her accusers and put on trial. She had declared that the local clergy had no inspiration from God to try her and asked what crime had she committed.

They said that she had broken the 5th commandment. She was disobeying the church and the state, thus metaphorically, disobeying her mother and her father. And thus she had committed a cardinal act of sin.

The governor of the state declared, "We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex." Women today owe a debt of gratitude to Ann Hutchison for her actions and bravery. She was banished by the state of Massachusetts and told to never come back. That was the kind of power the church and state had in those days. She moved to New York where she was tragically killed in an Indian raid.

Upon hearing of Ann Hutchison's death, Massachusetts's governor Winthrop took this as divine confirmation. He wrote, "God's hand is the more apparently seen herein, to pick out this woeful woman to make her and those belonging to her an unheard-of heavy example."

That's pretty weird isn't it? But that's what happened. Now next week we will discuss an even more interesting story of one Mary Dyer, another one of the great women's advocates in our early American history and finish the rest of this two-part message.

We ask for God's blessings on all fathers as we celebrate this day.

General Group Question: Do you believe that our nation was founded as a Christian nation? Briefly explain your answer.

Additional questions for the entire group or in groups of two or three of the same gender (15-20 minutes). If appropriate, please pray for each other's needs afterwards.

1. What are the implications of George Washington's statement: *"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and Bible"*?
2. How did Benjamin Franklin impact the stalemate during the Continental Congress?
3. Why do you think Noah Webster, one of our Founding Fathers made this statement? *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?*
4. Do you agree or disagree with this comment of John Adams? Briefly explain your answer. *Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.*
5. Do you agree or disagree with what the church did to Ann Hutchinson, because she was critical of their emphasis of works over grace? Briefly explain.