

**Sermon Study Guide Based on  
Ron Kelly's Message of June 28, 2009  
"American Christianity – How We Got Here (Part 2)"**

**[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; Deists; Unitarians; Quakers; Calvinism; Trinitarianism]**

**Excerpt:** Last week we left off with the tragic story of one of America's first female activists, the story of Ann Hutchinson. She dared to criticize sermons at the end of services. For that she was banished from the colony of Massachusetts and was tragically killed in an Indian uprising. The governor wrote that her death was God's judgment upon her for what she had done and what she had said.

As bad as this situation was, an even more tragic story follows concerning another woman in the woman's rights movement in our nation's history. It's the story of Mary Dyer. Mary was a young mother living in Boston and had been attending Ann Hutchinson's Bible studies. And in the course of time, Mary gave birth to a deformed stillborn baby. This is, of course, one of the great tragedies that a family could ever go through.

The minister's message at church included, *"We have been visited of late by the admonition of the Lord. One Mary Dyer of our midst, who has lately become addicted to heresy, had produced not a woman child but a monster. God himself has intervened and pointed his finger at this woman at the height of her sinful opinions."*

How would you like your pastor to call you out before the church after such a tragic event in your life? Well, gladly we've come a long way since those days of the early church in the colonies. And in the end, she was also banished from Boston.

Years later she made a trip to England where she heard the preaching of a famous reformer named George Fox, who was the founder of the movement we now call the Quakers. And she joined his movement and then returned back to Massachusetts, even though she had been banished.

When she returned and found to be a Quaker, she was arrested. She and another woman, who was also a Quaker, were stripped to the waist and beaten bloody by the magistrates. In 1659 she was convicted of defying an order of banishment and sentenced to die by hanging with two men. Their crime – they were Quakers. The two men were hanged, but she was spared, hoping that she would be frightened and change her mind.

A year later the governor of the state of Massachusetts condemned her to die because she had not recanted of her Quaker beliefs. So one of the famous but sad incidents of America's history was the execution of Mary Dyer, a harmless woman, who simply was a Quaker practicing her religious beliefs.

60 armed soldiers and drummers lined the route of her execution in an attempt to drown out any speaking to the crowd she might try to make. She was taken to a great elm tree, had a noose placed around her neck and was executed by the holy Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

As we have seen last week and will see today, American Christianity is filled with glorious highs and also some monumental lows. And as some today urge us to return to that early American Christian way and life, let's just stop and think a minute. Do they know what they are asking? Do we really want to return to days of the government of Massachusetts where people were hanged because they were of a different denomination? Let's hope not.

Now perhaps some background about the Puritan religion would be helpful. Early American Pilgrims, mostly Puritans, believed in purifying the Protestant religion even though the Protestant Reformation had begun about a century before in the early to middle 1500s.

As we've noted, the Puritans viewed the major Protestant denominations as too worldly and too sinful. So they were called Puritans because they were attempting to purify religion. That's how they viewed themselves.

Now the colonies divided up along religious lines. New England was dominantly Puritan (Congregational) while the Virginia south was predominately Anglican (Episcopalian). Later there were Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, Moravians and Anti-Baptists. So there were a variety of religious denominations generally sequestered together in geographic areas. And each controlled those areas where they were dominant. Of all the religious groups, the Puritans were the most controlling

To discourage people from joining other denominations, Puritans sometimes punished them by beatings. If that didn't stop them, they cut off an ear. And finally they sentenced them to be hanged like Mary Dyer and some of her companions.

This chart shows how Puritans viewed themselves. The Puritans are down here at the bottom of the chart in this little circle called "the saved." And they are protected from all the influences of society and Satan, because everyone else not a Puritan is viewed as being influenced, by one degree or another, by Satan the Devil.

As you move out of the Puritan circle and you get worse and worse by the influences of evil and sin until you finally come to Satan, himself. So non-Puritan Protestants are viewed outside the circle of "the saved." The next circle was Papalism – that is the Catholic Church. Most Protestant religions in America had a hatred for Catholicism.

Next were the American Indians tribes they had encountered with their idolatrous ways. Next were the Africans that were brought over to the New World as slaves with their tribal customs and religious worship. And then there was the whole history of paganism. The last circle is Satan the Devil who has influenced everybody.

Now when you look at yourself as the only core group of true believers, everybody else has something wrong with them. And when you have power of the government, it's amazing what could happen. There were brutal results for anyone not in the Puritan circle – banishments, beatings, mutilations and hangings.

Remember the infamous Salem witch trials of the 1690s? It's another dark chapter in our history. Now we're not justifying sorcery and witchcraft, but it was a wild a crazy time when everybody thought everybody else was a witch.

More than 150, accused of being witches, were arrested and imprisoned in the greater Salem area. 29 were accused of a capital felony and 19 of them were hanged. Do you know that there wasn't an official apology for the wrongs and injustices of those trials until the 1970s?

Now to the puritans, Quakers were especially heretical. They had strange worship services. They didn't have an ordained clergy and permitted women to speak in church if they were so moved. This of course was an anathema in the Puritan religion.

So Quakers would get together in their worship houses and they would just sit there, quietly contemplating waiting for the Spirit to move them. And when the Spirit moved them, they would shake – hence the name Quaker. They called themselves “The Society of Friends.” Now today you couldn't distinguish any difference between the Quakers and other Protestant denominations.

The Quakers back then had a couple of other odd customs. They had read in the Bible that when God indicted a nation for its sins through its prophets, sometimes the prophets would run naked through the streets proclaiming God's warning message. So, sometimes Quakers would take off all their clothes and run through the streets condemning sin. Then they would get arrested for indecent exposure.

As we already noted, we had two major religious movements dominating colonial America. The Puritans in New England and while Virginia was predominately Anglican (Episcopalian). One thing that sometimes brought them together is that were both anti-catholic and anti-Jewish. In many colonies, Catholics were not allowed to conduct Mass or have a priest hood. Jews couldn't worship at a synagogue on the Sabbath. So it took a while for our religious pluralistic society to develop.

There were several doctrinal controversies that influenced colonial America. The primary dominant religious philosophy of these early Puritan churches was called Calvinism. John Calvin, one the Protestant reformers, established his following in Switzerland.

One of the main tenants of Calvinism is that God has predestined those who would be saved and those who would not. To many Calvinists, this means the majority of humans will be consigned to eternal judgment and only the called righteous few will be saved.

They believed in a limited atonement – that is Christ's death was only for the elect. It was only those few who were predetermined before the foundation of the world to be saved. And they also believe in irresistible grace – that is the elect could not resist their salvation. So they did preach the gospel to reach those who were predestined to be saved. These beliefs remain controversial to this very day.

Another major doctrine is the trinity. The trinity had been an historic test of faith since before the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Any who did not believe in the trinity was considered a heretic. This was especially true after the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. The Orthodox churches in the east and the Catholic Church in the west were proponents of the trinity. And so most of the Protestant churches have accepted the doctrine of the trinity. It is still considered today a test of heresy.

Now the concept of the trinity states that while God is one, he is one in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And our denomination has been putting a lot of emphasis on the doctrine of the trinity these past few years. So we are very strongly in the Trinitarian camp. But others are not.

One of the faith movements in early colonial America was the Unitarians. Unitarians primarily grew out of Puritanism in a dispute over their Calvinist position of predestination. And they developed two contrasting doctrines. 1) They didn't accept the doctrine of the trinity and hence were called Unitarians. Thus Jesus and the Holy Spirit were not part of God. They were separate from God.

2) And Unitarians believed that the vast majority of humanity would ultimately be saved. And some branches of Unitarians called Unitarian Universalists believe that everybody will be saved and that nobody would be lost and cut off from God.

Now there was also another philosophy among our educated colonial people. They were called Deists. Deism is the belief in the existence of a God on the evidence of reason and by nature. So Deists accept a God of the universe who created the world, but he doesn't participate in it.

Among the founders of our nation, who were either influenced by Deism or were confessed Deists were Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and Paine. We recognize those names as the great among our original forefathers.

Historians would say that while George Washington was not a Deist, he certainly was influenced by its philosophy and stated things in Deistic terms. Now he and his wife were practicing Anglicans. They did go to church, but Washington was not overly religious in a church sense of the word. For some reason, he did not believe in taking communion. When he was chided from the pulpit for his non-action, George Washington would simply stop attending church when communion was offered.

In his writings and speeches, Washington practically never referred to Jesus Christ. Instead he used terms to describe God that are typically Deist – Governor of the universe, or Architect or Author of. Now when we read his writings today, we sense that he had some sort of a relationship with God, appreciating God and bringing God into the foundation of our nation, which is fine.

Now, Thomas Jefferson is another one of our great American heroes. And he was a man of a certain religious persuasion and conviction. But he did have his own foibles about religion and the churches of his day. It's said the Jefferson read the Bible for 30 minutes every night before he went to sleep. And that he was especially drawn to the teachings of Jesus.

Although not a classic Deist, nevertheless Jefferson was a Deist at heart and his language often reflected that. In his first inaugural address he said that we should be *"Acknowledging and adoring an overruling providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter."*

Now we would say that's a kind of vague reference to God. It's there, but it's not how we would say it today giving thanks and glory to our Savior Jesus Christ. And as a Deist Jefferson simply could not accept the revelations and miracles of the Bible.

And so he made his own version of the Bible. He took scissors and cut sections out. And when you go to Washington, DC today, you can see Jefferson's Bible in one of the museums. But what he did was cut out all references to Jesus' miracles. He did not accept the virgin birth, the healings and other miracles of Jesus and he did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus after the crucifixion.

He saw Jesus as a great moral and ethical teacher and wanted to copy and institute those teachings into his life and into the life of our young country. And for that we should be thankful. But we may not want a modern day version of Thomas Jefferson.

Some of the things Jefferson said may shock you. He once said, *"the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."* To him, the virgin birth of Jesus was merely a fable.

Another time he said *"In every country and in every age the priest has been hostile to liberty; he is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own."* And so because of clergy abuse, he was a strong advocate of the separation of the church and state, which is one of the founding principles of our country we all hold in high esteem.

[Mr. Kelly's point isn't to demean Thomas Jefferson or to take away his place as one of our Founding Fathers. His point is that we don't want to return today to the late 1700s and early 1800s.]

Another of our colonial forefathers was Roger Williams. Now he was banished from the colony of Massachusetts when he chose not to be baptized by sprinkling but by immersion. He had reject infant baptism.

He then founded the colony of Rhode Island, which he established on the basis of religious freedom. It became the first colony that had the separation of church and state and to allow religious freedom. The first 7<sup>th</sup> day Christian observing church was founded in Providence, Rhode Island. Down the street was the first Jewish Synagogue permitted to be constructed as a house of worship in the United States of America.

Roger Williams became a Baptist. But that lasted only a short time. He finally rejected all organized religion altogether. And he concluded that there was no such thing as a "true" church. And that the only revival of the church that was necessary would occur in the Millennium after the return of Christ.

As we come to the middle of the 1700s, religion was gaining a tremendous influence. This is called in American history "the Great Awakening." This was a time of reaching out with all sorts of evangelism, campaigns and famous preachers coming on the scene. One of the most famous American preachers of the time was Jonathan Edwards. Puritan Calvinism was a dominant influence in Edwards' life.

How would you feel is you were sitting in his church on this day when he delivered this message. *"How dismal will it be, when you are under these racking torments, to know assuredly that you never, never shall be delivered from them; to have no hope; when you shall wish that you might be turned into a toad or a serpent, but shall have no hope of it;*

*when you would rejoice if you might but have any relief, after you shall have endured these torments millions of ages, but shall have no hope of it; when after you have worn out the age of the sun, moon and stars in your dolorous groans and lamentations, without any rest day or night, or one minute's ease, yet you shall have no hope of ever being delivered; ... and that the smoke of your torment shall still ascend up forever and ever; ... your bodies, which have been burning and roasting all this while in these glowing flames, yet shall not have been consumed, but will remain to roast throughout eternity."*

Now that's only one excerpt from one of John Edwards' sermons. Probably the most famous of all his sermons is entitled "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God." But such was the nature of Calvinist theology.

Now Benjamin Franklin began as a Congregationalist, but later became a Unitarian/Deist. But he couldn't fully accept an absentee God who created the universe and then left it alone. So he devised his own theology and explained that God created a system of deputy gods in charge of various areas of the universe. We can obviously admire what Ben Franklin contributed to the Continental Congress, but not his theology.

John Adams was also a professed Unitarian and an anti-Trinitarian. Our Founding Fathers lived at a time called "the enlightenment" where there was the expansion of philosophy, knowledge and education. Thomas Jefferson started the first non-religious school in America – the University of Virginia.

We also probably remember Jefferson's penning of the words to the Preamble to the US Constitution. It's probably the greatest single short paragraph outside of Biblical literature ever to be written in human history.

*"We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."*

Aren't we thankful that our nation was established with that Preamble and on that premise! And that we separated church and state in the first amendment to the constitution:

*"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."*

This means that the church could grow and develop and God could work with and did work with the very beginning of our nation when the Puritans first landed on our shores right up to our day. But God works in different ways with different people in different times. We need to acknowledge that.

Sometimes people think that we live in a more decadent world today than before. Let's look at a graph that shows the percentage of people attending church services and being involved in Christian activities in America during the course of our history. It's called the Rates of Religious Adherence.

Now in 1776 only 17% of our population attended church. While religion dominated parts of our history, people as a whole weren't all that religious. By the 1860s it had grown to 37%.

By the early 1900s, it topped 50%. In the 1950's we approached 60%. Now today approximately 62% of our population today is actively involved in religion – Christianity.

One great author wrote this statement. "Democracy is God's great experiment to allow man to govern himself." Almost all governments, from time immemorial, have been dictatorial, hierarchical. Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people to quote Lincoln.

Winston Churchill once said: "Democracy is the worst form of human government ever devised, except for all the rest." In other words, it's the best that's ever been devised. Flawed, with difficulties – yes, but it's still the best.

So how should we view history and now the time in which we live including the new presidency of Barak Obama? Here's what the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about their current situation.

**1 Timothy 2:1-3, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – 2) for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all Godliness and holiness. 3) This is good, and pleases God our Savior."**

So when Mr. Kelly sees politicians doing things he doesn't like, he doesn't have to mount a campaign, he doesn't have to scream or shout or make disparaging remarks, or impute motives to people's character. He just has to go in prayer to God and ask him to bless them and to thank him for them and pray that we can live peaceful lives.

Mr. Kelly also prays that these 62% of Americans who are active Christians get busy and influence the world in which we live and that the government makes it possible for us to do so.

Paul wrote to Titus in **Titus 3:1. "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good."** So, as Christians, we have an obligation not to be politically involved from the pulpit. Everyone's political feeling and belief is personal and should not be discussed publicly from the pulpit. The ministry doesn't try to influence your vote one way or another. We just ask you to pray for whomever and whatever the circumstances are.

Finally, from **Romans 13:1-3** we read: "**Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2) Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3) For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.**"

The instruction of the Bible is for Christians to live godly, respectful, law obedient lives, whatever time frame you live in. Then in verse 7, Paul tells the Romans to pay their taxes and then to give respect and honor to those who deserve it. **7) "Give everyone what you**

**owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."**

Pastor Glen has been talking lately about how our church and our denomination are uniquely poised for our time in history. We have a passionate group of people, who want to grow in grace and knowledge and share the Gospel.

Now the Puritans may have been poised for their time in history. But Mr. Kelly doesn't want to go back and be one. Others may have been poised for time in history, like the Great Awakening but we don't want to go back there.

Now this is our time when we have the opportunity to serve God as American Christians to be an example and to be a light to the world around us.

**General Group Question**: How important do you believe the first amendment to the constitution that separates church and state was for the growth and strength of our nation?

**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 were some of the main doctrinal beliefs of the Puritans?
2. What does Calvinism teach?
3. Why is the doctrine of the trinity a test for Christian heresy?
4. What were some of the main doctrinal beliefs of the Quakers? The Unitarians?
5. What are the main concepts of Deism?
6. What did Thomas Jefferson believe about Jesus Christ?
7. How influential was Roger Williams to the founding principles of our nation?
8. What advice Paul wrote to Christians in how they should behave with respect to their government and it's leaders? Is this still valid for today?
9. How is our congregation uniquely poised for our time in history?