

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

JULY 06, 2008



For more sermons go to www.wrconchurch.org

Jeremiah 29:4-14

"God Shed His Grace On Thee"

It's normal around Independence Day to ponder the question: why has America prospered as it has? There are several possible answers, of course. One says we are smart, hard working, have the best form of government, embrace democratic capitalism, and are well-meaning and good people. We have made it all work by our own efforts! Another more skeptical view says a fortunate combination of space, natural resources, waves of immigrants, and a moment in history, have combined to give the US its moment - but we are just one more nation whose time came and will soon go. It's all a matter of luck and timing!

Of course these are not the views of most Americans, and especially of Christians, who see the hand of God in all history. So for us, the question is *"Has God blessed America - as we are sure he has - because we have deserved it, or by a free act of his grace?"* Strangely, many people seem to believe that we have deserved it; that we have been rewarded by God. So let us for a few minutes look at our history as *"a Christian Nation,"* and see how we might have earned God's approval and reward, or not.

1) Good Beginnings

Nationally we got off to a good start, I think most people would agree. The European settlers of the early 1600s wanted more than

anything else religious freedom, and both the Episcopalians in Virginia (a colony since 1607 which at this point included Long Island), and the Congregationalist Pilgrims in Plymouth, were explicit about their aims. The *Mayflower Compact* of 1620, signed in Provincetown harbor, declares *"[We] having undertaken, for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do... solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic.."*

A decade later, Governor John Winthrop called the Massachusetts Bay Colony *"a city on a hill."* He knew the dangers of claiming God's blessing on what the Puritan settlers were doing: *"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us... if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God.."*

Sadly he was more right than he knew: within a generation the Puritan Colony was as repressive religiously as anything the settlers had left in Europe. By 1638, Roger Williams had fled Boston for *"Rogues Island"* and founded the *First Baptist Church* in Providence in pursuit of freedom of religious conscience. The next two generations fell into religious disarray: many could not give an account of their

conversion, and were not eligible to be full church members; so the *Half-Way Covenant* was adopted in 1662 to allow the children of unconverted parents to be baptized. By 1700, most historians think the religious life of the new colonies was in poor shape.

2) *Revival and Revolution*

Who knows how American history would have gone had it not been for the revivals of the mid-1700s; what we now call the *First Great Awakening*? It fell to Jonathan Edwards, grandson of one of the architects of the Half-Way Covenant, Solomon Stoddard, to be at the center of the Awakening, and its best chronicler and theologian. In the Congregational churches of New England in the 1730s and 40s, Edwards and others preached the need for an "immediate personal experience" of salvation in Jesus Christ. Thousands responded, and whole towns were changed.

George Whitefield, the greatest evangelical preacher in England, toured the colonies and spoke to outdoor gatherings of 25000 people at a time. The Awakening spread beyond New England: this church owes its incorporation in 1785 as *The Wading River Congregational Church* to the revivals centered on Old Steeple Church in Aquebogue. Some historians credit the Awakening with laying the social and political groundwork for the events of 1776 - what Americans call *The War of Independence* (and Brits call *The American Revolution!*). Jonathan Edwards was in conflict not only with the liberalism of his grandfather Stoddard's generation, but the rising tide of *Unitarianism* coming out of Boston; people who despised the "enthusiasm" of the revivalists.

Meanwhile in Philadelphia, a new nation published its manifestos. Thomas Jefferson's stirring words in *The Declaration of Independence* claimed that "*the Laws of Nature*

and of Nature's God" entitled the people to assume a "free and equal station." Jefferson asserted that "*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...*"

Jefferson was not a Christian in any normal sense of that word: he was a *Deist* who believed that "Nature's God... the Creator" had started the world but now took no actions in it; there are no miracles, prayer is not answered, and Jesus was not divine. *The Jefferson Bible* was his attempt to clip out the sections of the Gospels that were "evidently" from Jesus and which taught "*the most sublime and benevolent code of morals.*" Jefferson was much influenced by John Locke's theories of social contract; thus the Declaration that government "*derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.*"

Among the Founding Fathers, George Washington was perhaps the most orthodox believer; but was a rather nominal Episcopalian who rarely went to worship and left before communion was served. John Adams was a Unitarian who, like Washington, thought religion promoted good public morals; Madison was another Deist. Jefferson thought the American experiment would aid other nations to "burst the chains of monkish ignorance and superstition." With Madison he crafted the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* which forbade "compulsion" in religion and gave "all men the freedom to profess" their religious opinions. Jefferson is of course famous (or infamous) for favoring "*a wall of separation between Church and State*" in his 1802 letter to Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut.

3) *Civil War & Camp Meetings*

Vital as Madison's "non-establishment" and "free-exercise" clauses of the First Amendment have been to all faiths in America, their first-fruits were the rise of *Transcendentalism* in the mid 1800s though Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, William Ellery Channing and others. So were the religious sensibilities of the northern churches gradually reshaped from their Calvinist beginnings, just in time for the Civil War. The war was, it has been argued, about more than slavery, "state's rights" or the preservation of the Union. It was also in some sense a theological division between southerners who took the Bible literally, and could find no New Testament prohibition of slavery; and northerners whose churches encouraged their people to look at "the larger biblical picture of God's work and God's will," and to conclude that abolition was now God's will (as Wilberforce had argued for a generation in England, so that it finally passed Parliament in 1833).

In the 1800s Methodism had flourished in "camp meetings" and crusades, especially on the western frontier, and evangelists like Charles Finney and Dwight Moody brought in a revivalism that causes religious historians to count two more "Awakenings" in the early and the later 1800s. Tens of millions of Irish and Italian immigrants also arrived, so that by 1850 the Roman Catholic Church was the largest religious group in the US. In the Civil War, many Protestant churches split into northern and southern blocks; but the fact that the Union was victorious meant that northern state theology was on the ascendance.

4) *The Social Gospel, The Fundamentalists, and the Religious Right*

By the time Walter Rauschenbusch wrote *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907, the

needs of the poor and of working class Americans were so dire that well-to-do Christians flocked to the *Social Gospel* movement, refocusing Christian life on reconstructing American social life. As Christians of many theological stripes worked together on social programs, theological distinctives became less important, and gradually less mentionable. From 1910-1915 a group of conservative biblical scholars published 90 essays entitled *The Fundamentals* as a defense against the "higher criticism" of the Bible and the liberal tendencies of "the Social Gospel." Ironically, scholars like James Orr, B.B. Warfield, A.C. Dixon, Bishop Handley Moule and G. Campbell Morgan gave birth to a movement known thereafter as *Fundamentalism*, which quickly became deeply anti-intellectual and separatist.

It was 1947 before evangelical theologian Carl Henry published *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, asking why conservative Christians had given up on American culture. With Billy Graham, E.J. Carnell, E.F. Fuller, and Harold Ockenga, Henry founded two moderate evangelical seminaries (Fuller and Gordon-Conwell), *Christianity Today* magazine, the *National Association of Evangelicals*, and launched the *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*. Little did they imagine that when the evangelical effort to "restore American culture" finally took off in the 1970s and 80s, it would be in the form of the *Moral Majority* and the *Christian Coalition* – the new "Religious Right."

5) *What Does It All Mean?*

We could go on - about how evangelicalism is changing today, about decline and renewal in mainline churches, about resurgence and turmoil in American Catholicism, about especially American groups like Christian Scientists, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses

and Mormons. But what does it all mean?
From God's point of view - if we could imagine that - has there been something special about American religious history that has caused God to reward us as a nation for our faith or our obedience?

I hope you will forgive me, as a Brit on the 4th of July weekend, for saying that I can't see it! What I can see is that *the US is today the most Christian country* of the western world in important ways: that 90% of people in this country claim to be Christians, that more Americans are in church on any Sunday than in any other western nation (and more Americans *worship* on Sunday than watch all sports combined!). That Americans give more to charity, especially churches, than anyone; that America gives more foreign aid than any nation; that America has successfully absorbed tens of millions of immigrants and continues to do so with less fuss and less prejudice and less violence than almost any other country.

That it is still true that America stands, for good or ill, "like a city on a hill" as Governor Winthrop foresaw - meaning that for a long time, much of the world has learned what Christianity looks like in everyday life by looking at America. That there are now alternatives in south east Asia and in Africa can only be a good thing.

But is all this "Christian America" a reason for God to specially reward the USA? Many people think so, or at least affirm it negatively: that if American culture continues (as they see it) to "go to hell in a hand-basket," then "God will remove his blessing from our land." But I find it strange that people who profess to believe a personal Gospel that is *all about grace* believe a national Gospel that is *all about reward*.

I think Katharine Lee Bates - English professor at Wellesley and daughter of a

Congregational minister - had her theology of culture right when she wrote *America The Beautiful* in 1893 : "*America, America, God shed his grace on thee.*"

Let us pray he will continue to do so, this Independence Day weekend...