

“Greatness of America: Signers of the Declaration of Independence”

Psalm 33:12

7-5-15

Psalm 33:12 says that “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.” So I begin with a question: Why is America great? Why is America so blessed as a nation? Is it because of our abundant natural resources? Other nations have natural resources? Is it because our people are hard working? Other people are hard working. Is it because our people are smart? Other people are smart. Is it because our people are religious? Other people are religious.

So why is America great? Why is this nation, above all other nations, the most prosperous, the most technologically advanced, the most compassionate, the most free nation on earth at this time in history? Consider the fact that we represent only 4.5% of the world’s population but command nearly 40% of the world’s wealth. America is the birthplace of inventions like the telegraph, the telephone, the light-bulb, the airplane, the internet, the Global Positioning System... We have freed more people from tyranny, helped more people rebuild from the ravages of war, delivered more humanitarian aid to those who are suffering than any other nation in the world. We are not a perfect nation, but America has been a force for good in the world and America is still the wonder of the world.

Why is America great? I would argue that America is great because, for the most part, those who immigrated here and those who founded our nation honored the God of the Bible. That is why America is an exceptional nation. Even with all our current problems, we are still the most generous, prosperous, free, and God-blessed people on the face of the earth! So our mission this morning is to uncover the ample evidence for our rich spiritual heritage and the deep biblical faith of those who helped shape our nation and, under God, made America an exceptional nation.

Yet if you watch much of the so-called historical programming, read the recent biographies, or listen to lectures at colleges and universities, you will be confronted with claim after claim that the Founding Fathers were wealthy, slave owning, sexually promiscuous, alcoholics, who got their ideas from European Enlightenment. That these men used religious jargon that was common among the people, but they really didn’t share their faith, and that if they did have a religious inclination it was toward Deism. True or false?

Could the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence be victims of *identity theft*? Now none of these men were perfect. Some were rich, slave-owners, but many more weren’t. In fact, many were opposed to slavery. But were they deists? Belief in a detached deity? That God wound up the world like a watch and let it spin and He no longer intervenes in the affairs of men. No need to pray to that god. That’s Deism. Let’s look at what they wrote and did and you be the judge.

The painting by John Trumbull is of the signing of the Declaration that took place on August 2, 1776. Not all the men in the picture actually signed the document (e.g., Robert Livingston from NY was on the Committee to draft the Declaration, but had to go back and take office in NY and didn’t stay to sign). So it is a representation. Regardless, the men who voted on and later signed that document were not only declaring their Independence from England, they were declaring

their dependence upon Almighty God. How do we know that? Because the Declaration of Independence, appeals to God no less than four times.

"[T]he Laws of Nature and of Nature's God..."

"[A]ll Men are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights . . ."

"[A]ppealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions . . ."

"[W]ith a firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and Sacred Honor- - ."

Where did the concept come from that there is God who rules the universe according to law, that God created all human beings equal with inherent rights, that God is the Supreme Judge of the World, and that God providentially intervenes on behalf of his people? Not from the European Enlightenment. Not from French philosophes like Voltaire and Rousseau. Those concepts come from the Bible. And I told you about the study conducted at the University of Houston by Dr. Donald S. Lutz and Dr. Charles S. Hyneman showing that 34% of the quotations from sources found in publications in the Founding Era came from the Bible, over 4 times more than the next most cited source.¹

Q – OK, so the Declaration references God a few times. Again, there are politicians today who bring God into the conversation, including the current President. Does that really prove anything about the Founding Fathers having a Biblical faith?

A – No, but what they did and said as a group and as individuals does. For starters, this group and their successors over the course of the 8 year war, issued no less than 15 nationwide calls to prayer for thanksgiving or repentance. Not exactly something that atheist, agnostics or Deists would do. They also appointed paid chaplains for themselves and allocated money for military chaplains (\$20 per month, same as a captain). And they had the Congressional chaplains (William White and George Duffield) review a Bible produced by Robert Aitken, a Philadelphia printer, who described it as a "Neat edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools." Then Congress acted on September 12, 1782:

*"Whereupon, Resolved, That the United States in Congress assembled... highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken, as subservient to the interest of religion . . . in this country, and . . . they recommend this edition of the bible to the inhabitants of the United States, and hereby authorize him to publish this recommendation in the manner he shall think proper."*²

So Congress recommended a printing of the Bible to the American people!

Q – Simply pandering to their base? But what about them as individuals?

President of the Congress, *John Hancock*, who reportedly signed his name so bold and big because he wanted King George to see it without his spectacles, was the son of a preacher and he preached on occasion. On the anniversary of the Boston Massacre, March 5, 1774, Hancock spoke from the pulpit of the Old South Church:

“I have the most animating confidence that the present noble struggle for liberty will terminate gloriously for America. And let us play the man for our GOD, and for the cities of our GOD; while we are using the means in our power, let us humbly commit our righteous cause to the great LORD of the universe, who loveth righteousness and hateth inequity.” (Psalm 45:7)

He also declared days of prayer as Governor of Massachusetts. Hancock’s proclamation on March 4, 1793, called people to a “*day of FASTING, HUMILIATION, and PRAYER... that with true conviction of Heart we may confess our sins, resolve to forsake them, and implore the Divine forgiveness, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior.*”

The Secretary of the Congress, Charles Thomson produced an American edition of the Bible from the Greek. He began by translating the Greek version of the Hebrew OT (called the Septuagint) into English. Took him 19 years and was considered by British biblical scholars to represent the best in American scholarship. When he finished the OT, he started translating the Greek NT, the first American translation, which took him another year, and completed an entire Bible. So he spent 20 years of his life translating God’s word.

Q – What about the Committee charged with drafting the Declaration? That committee consisted of Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, who served as Co-Chairs, Thomas Jefferson who was nominated to write the first draft, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

Two of the least orthodox Christian Founding Fathers were Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. If we had to put a religious designation on them, it wouldn’t be deist, but probably *Unitarian*. In other words, both believed in a God who was providentially active in human affairs, but they didn’t believe in the divinity of Jesus. Yet both promoted biblical Christianity for the new nation.

What about Benjamin Franklin? In July of 1776, Benjamin Franklin was appointed to the committee to draft a national seal. He proposed a rendering of “Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the red sea, and pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters,” and having this motto: “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”³ Franklin also stood in the midst of the contentious Constitutional Convention and called those assembled to return to God in prayer lest they be like the builders of Babel, and quoting Psalm 127:1: “*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.*”⁴

And what of Thomas Jefferson, famous for his letter proclaiming a “Wall of Separation between Church and State,” which Courts have used to say we need to separate God from government, Christ from culture, and Faith from public life? Well Jefferson was raised as an Episcopalian, but later in life he didn’t believe in the divinity of Christ. Yet he faithfully supported Christianity. In fact, here are some of his actions as an elected official:

As a public official in Virginia, Jefferson introduced several bills in the state legislature supporting religious activities, and as Governor, he issued a: day of “Thanksgiving and Prayer. As President, Jefferson agreed with legislation providing \$300 to “assist the said Kaskaskia tribe in the erection of a church” and to provide “annually for seven years \$100 towards the support of a Catholic Priest” in 1803.⁵ Jefferson also faithfully attended church services in the United

States Capitol, allowed his Marine Corps Band to play for worship services, and when the church out grew the old House Chamber, church services were established at the Treasury and at the War Departments, which were under Jefferson's supervision.⁶ Later, church services were held in the Senate Chamber, Supreme Court Chamber, and other parts of the Capitol.⁷ So in a sense, Thomas Jefferson began the "multi-site church" movement in America.

Furthermore, the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State would be particularly troubled by President Jefferson's statement recorded by Rev. Ethan Allen: "*No nation has ever existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man and I, as Chief Magistrate of this nation, am bound to give it the sanction of my example.*"²⁴ So the Court's misinterpretation of Jefferson's "Wall of Separation of Between Church and State" is the biggest lie to be treated as law in this nation's history. He meant for the Wall to protect the church from the state, and that is what the First Amendment does.

Well, so much for the least biblically orthodox members of the Declaration committee. What about the other members? Well *John Adams* you've heard of. He was baptized by John Hancock's father. He became the nation's Second President and yet he is also referred to as a deist or even an agnostic or atheist. However, as a young man, John Adams made the following entry in his diary (2/22/1756):

"Suppose a nation in some distant Region should take the Bible for their only law Book, and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited! ...What a Utopia, what a Paradise would this region be."⁸

Did he still believe it later in life? Consider his letter to Thomas Jefferson, written some 40 years after helping him draft and then sign the Declaration. John Adams stated in that letter: "The general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were... the general principles of Christianity"⁹ John Adams doesn't sound much like a deist, atheist, or agnostic to me.

What about *Roger Sherman*? He was distinguished as the only Founding Father to sign all four major founding documents: The Articles of Association, 1774; The Declaration of Independence, 1776; The Articles of Confederation, 1777; and The Constitution of the United States, 1787 and helped shape the First Amendment in the First Federal Congress. As a member of the White Haven Congregational Church, Roger Sherman was asked to use his expertise in revising the wording of their statement of faith, and preached on occasion. One of his sermons was titled: "A Short Sermon on the Duty of Self-Examination Preparatory to Receiving the Lord's Supper."¹⁰ Sherman also faithfully served as a deacon, as well as church clerk and treasurer.

There was one more on the Declaration Committee: *Robert Livingston*. A graduate of King's College (Columbia University), Livingston helped draft but was unable to be present for the signing of the Declaration. Yet he is described as a "sincere and devoted Christian."¹¹ He later administered the oath of So the Committee that drafted the Declaration at the very least had a biblical world-view, and promoted Christianity in public life.

One of the little known signers is the *Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon*, a Presbyterian Pastor and immigrant from Scotland, who came to America to assume the presidency of the New Jersey College, which later became Princeton. Dr. Witherspoon became the only ordained minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps Dr. Witherspoon's greatest achievement was as an educator and mentor to many of our Founding Fathers and early leaders. Witherspoon graduated 478 students who directly shaped America, including: James Madison, who was a U.S. President; Aaron Burr, Jr., who was a U.S. Vice-President; three U.S. Supreme Court justices, 37 judges; 10 Cabinet members; 13 Governors; 21 U.S. Senators; 39 U.S. Representatives; and 114 Pastors.¹² Further, he trained nine of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention.¹³ Consequently, Witherspoon's biblical views were reflected in our Constitution through his students, especially regarding how the fallen nature of man necessitates checks and balances in government.

Rev. Witherspoon was a true patriot. He and Elizabeth lost their eldest son, James, in the Battle of Germantown on October 4, 1777.¹⁴ After his wife died in 1789, Witherspoon headed a committee of the New Jersey legislature assigned to abolish slavery within the state.¹⁵ Following John Witherspoon's death in 1794, Vice-President John Adams admired him as: "A true son of liberty. So he was. But first, he was a son of the Cross."¹⁶ The life of the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon is another lost episode in American History.

Another of the lesser known but important signers is *Dr. Benjamin Rush*. In 1791, this signer of the Declaration founded *The First Day Society* which grew into today's Sunday Schools. He also helped start America's first Bible society. Dr. Rush also openly declared his faith in Jesus Christ: "My only hope of salvation is in the infinite transcendent love of God manifested to the world by the death of His Son upon the Cross. Nothing but His blood will wash away my sins. I rely exclusively upon it. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!"

Another signer, *Francis Hopkinson* was a church music director and choir leader, and the co-editor of a 1767 hymnal - one of the first purely American hymnals. His work took the 150 Psalms and set them all to music so that we could sing the Psalms, much as King David had done thousands of years before.

Charles Carroll of Carrollton: The longest living Signer of the Declaration, Charles Carroll of Carrollton was made famous recently by the movie National Treasure as having supposedly passed on the clues to the location of the treasure to the ancestor of Thomas Gates. Well that is the fiction, here is the fact: He was the only Catholic Signer of the Declaration and he used his wealth to help build a house of worship. He professed: "*On the mercy of my Redeemer I rely for salvation and on His merits; not on the works I have done in obedience to His precepts.*"¹⁷

Richard Stockton is another Signer of the Declaration, which says with a firm reliance upon Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to one another our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor. Well Richard Stockton was put to the test. He was captured by the British, and subjected to harsh treatment. Even though the American's arranged for a prisoner exchange for his release, his health was broken. Knowing his death was near, he wrote his last will and testament that contains strong Christian language:

*"[I] subscribe to the entire belief of the great and leading doctrines of the Christian religion, . . . [and I exhort] that the course of life held up in the Christian system is calculated for the most complete happiness that can be enjoyed in this mortal state."*¹⁸ He said, in spite of all the suffering, Christianity is the only way to make it through this life.

Q – What about Samuel Adams, Father of the Revolution?

Adams grew up in a Christian home and became a devout follower of Christ. The proof is in the fact that he entered Harvard at age 14 to become a Puritan minister.¹⁹ There he heard the great revivalist George Whitefield preach in 1740, and that encounter made a lasting impact on his life and later career.

Samuel Adams became Governor of Massachusetts after serving as Lt. Gov. alongside his friend, John Hancock, and he made several proclamations declaring a day of thanksgiving to God or a day of fasting and prayer. This is a part of one from March 20, 1797:

*And as it is our duty to extend our wishes to the happiness of the great family of man, I conceive that we cannot better express ourselves than by humbly supplicating the Supreme Ruler of the world that the rod of tyrants may be broken to pieces, and the oppressed made free again; that wars may cease in all the earth, and that the confusions that are and have been among nations may be overruled by promoting and speedily bringing on that holy and happy period when the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ may be everywhere established, and all people everywhere willingly bow to the sceptre of Him who is Prince of Peace.*²⁰

So these Founding Fathers are victims of identity theft. By their own words and deeds we find that they were not Deists, agnostics, and atheists, but I could make the case that 53 of 56 were orthodox Christians. Even the remaining three had something of a biblical worldview and publicly supported the Christian faith. One was a pastor, and several others were lay-ministers or were active in Christian service. About half of the Signers were educated in schools established for the purpose of training ministers for the Gospel. What were half these founders doing by getting degrees in universities that were founded as seminaries? *I guess they were doing opposition research, huh?* Not bad for a bunch of deists and atheists.

Well now you know the true identities of the men who declared their independence from Britain, but also declared their dependence on Almighty God. Their identities are a lost episode in American history. And now you know some of the reasons why America is a great nation. It is because the people who led in the founding of our government honored the God of the Bible. What will the next episode in American history look like? Under God, that is up to us, Amen?

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¹ Donald S. Lutz and Charles S. Hyneman, "The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought," *American Political Review* 189 (1984): 189-197. They examined some 15,000 documents written during America's founding era (1760-1805), and analyzed their political content. Included were political volumes, monographs, pamphlets, and newspaper articles. There they found 3,154 citations or references to other sources. The source cited or quoted most often in these was the Bible at 34% and the most cited book of the Bible was Deuteronomy. After the Bible, the top sources cited were: Baron Montesquieu at 8.3%, William Blackstone at 7.9%; and John Locke at 2.9%. Rousseau and Voltaire are below 1 percent and often quoted by the Founders to refute what they said.

² *Journals of Congress* (Philadelphia: David C. Claypool, 1782), 468-469.

³ Franklin, Benjamin. August 14, 1776. Charles Francis Adams (son of John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams), ed., *Letters of John Adams, Addressed to His Wife*, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1841), Vol. I, p. 152. L.H. Butterfield, Marc Frielander and Mary-Jo Kings, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John - Selected Letters from The Adams Family 1762-1784* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 154.

⁴ As recorded by James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787* (1787; reprinted NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), 210.

⁵ As recorded in Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Claire Clarke, eds., *American State Papers*, (Washington, D. C.: Gales and Seaton, 1832), 4:687.

⁶ Hutson, *Religion*, 89; see also John Quincy Adams' entry for October 23, 1803 in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1874), 1:265.

⁷ John Quincy Adams records in his diary that a worship service was held in the Supreme Court Chamber on February 2, 1806. See John Quincy Adams, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (177) as displayed at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/f0611s.jpg>.

²⁴ Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, 96, quoting from a handwritten history in possession of the Library of Congress, "Washington Parish, Washington City," by Rev. Ethan Allen.

⁸ L.H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols., (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961), 3:9.

⁹ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, 10 vols., (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1850-56), 10:45, to Thomas Jefferson on June 28, 1813.

¹⁰ As cited in Christopher Collier, *Roger Sherman's Connecticut* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1979), 320.

¹¹ B. J. Lossing, *Lives of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (1848), 243.

¹² Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman, *John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 172.

¹³ Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 2 vols., (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 2:229.

¹⁴ John Frelinghuysen Hageman, *History of Princeton and Its Institutions*, 2 vols., (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1879), 1:92.

¹⁵ Mark F. Bernstein, "The Great Debate: How Princetonians have helped to shape the national discussion of race," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, January 13, 2010. See online: <http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2010/01/13/pages/5962/index.xml?page=3&>

¹⁶ As cited in Roger Schultz, *Covenanting in America: The Political Theology of John Witherspoon*, Master's Thesis (Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School., 1985) 149.

¹⁷ From an autographed letter in owned by Wallbuilders, written by Charles Carroll to Charles W. Wharton, Esq., on September 27, 1825, from Doughoragen, Maryland.

¹⁸ Samuel Davies Alexander, *Princeton College During the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1872), 3-4.

¹⁹ William Wells, *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams*, 3 vols.(Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 1:10.

²⁰ Adams, Samuel. March 20, 1797, as Governor of Massachusetts, in a Proclamation of a Day of Fast. Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, Vol. II, pp. 355-56.