

***Reform School:
Our Nation's Reformed Roots***

This is the first message in a four-part series of sermons offered for the glory of God in honor of John Calvin's 500th Birthday. They are intended to illustrate the connections between our Reformed faith and the Bible.

**A Sermon Preached by
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What was it that we celebrated yesterday? Our nation's independence, of course, but more than that, too. We celebrated what is good – and perhaps even unique – about America and the American way of being a nation. When we sing the Star Spangled Banner or recite the Pledge of Allegiance we re-affirming our commitment to great American ideals and affirmations such as the equality of all people, government as a tool for good, and the notion that the best governments are established and supported by the very people they serve. We take these notions for granted most days of the year, but not on 4th of July Weekend, and in hundreds of nations around the world they are still foreign concepts. Freely elected representative democracies remain the exception outside of North America and Europe, and the concept of basic human rights is something that many rulers prefer to talk about rather than defend. Why is America somewhat unique in this regard? What is it about our history that has made us a place where liberty, equality, and unity aren't just slogans, but – for the most part – everyday realities? That's the mystery I'd like to solve with you today.

In establishing our principles of governance, our founders could have cited ancient treatises from political philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. They could have pulled a model of government from that of ancient Rome or quoted England's *Magna Carta*. To be sure these authors and these examples from history influenced our founders as they wrote the Declaration of Independence and crafted the Constitution, but far more important to them were the words of the "Author of Liberty," contained in the Bible.

If we look carefully we can find many of the foundational principles of the American system of governance in these pages. The founders of our nation knew the Bible and used its message about the proper role of government to appeal to the conscience of friend and enemy alike.

In an age when most of the world was ruled by kings who inherited their office or despots who fought their way to the top, when the masses were deemed hopelessly unable to know what was best for themselves, our founders had the unmitigated temerity to declare these incendiary words:

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, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, ... Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; ... But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

Declaration of Independence, 1776

These familiar words are based on two interrelated concepts: that legitimate governments must serve the governed, and, should they cease to do so, it is the right and duty of the governed to revolt. The reason these words from the Declaration of Independence had such much weight was that the ideas behind them were taken straight from the pages of Saint Paul's letter to the church at Rome. Consider Romans Chapter 13, vv. 1-7:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them--taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Romans 13:1-7 NRSV

There are the beginnings of a Christian philosophy of governance here. Paul wrote at a time when he was seeking to advise new Christians on how to live their lives. Should they oppose the pagan Roman government? Should they even pay taxes? Could Christians serve in the government? In American today these questions are largely

resolved for Christians. But imagine that you are a Christian living in China or Cuba or Saudi Arabia. Paul tells his friends – and us -- a few things.

First, civil governments are meant to be a blessing. They have a role distinct from that of the church: primarily to deter bad behavior and keep the peace. Paul even says that in performing this role they are servants of God and to the extent they perform this function they derive their ultimate authority from God. Even *pagan* governments might well be serving the purposes of God.

Second, the purpose of God that governments serve is to aid and defend the governed. Paul calls a properly functioning government, “God’s servant for your good.” In Paul’s day servant leaders were rare. King David came close in Jewish history, but Jesus himself was the primary inspiration for Paul’s words. In Jesus he saw the prototypical “servant king,” the one who came “not to be served but to serve.” In his letter to the church at Rome Paul encourages the Christians there to obey the Romans; at the same time he’s coming quite close to saying that self-serving rulers have no business governing and no divine justification for doing so. Can you see how the authors of the Declaration of Independence drew loosely on Paul’s work to justify taking the radical step of revolt?

And consider the core principle of equality established in our nation’s Constitution. To be sure, the framers made dramatic exceptions to the principle that “all men are created equal” -- especially when it came to the rights of women, slaves, and native Americans. But at the time they were working even the idea that *all white males* had the same right to participate in their governance, regardless of education level, social class, family lineage, or personal wealth was revolutionary. Where do you think they found justification for extending such a right to the masses?

In the Bible, of course. Once again there was precedent in the words of Saint Paul. When the church of Galatia was dealing with internal dissension and hints of hierarchy he wrote: In Christ

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:28-29 NRSV

We could dare to paraphrase Paul and say that

When America is at its best, there is no longer German or Nigerian, rich or poor, white collar or blue collar, for we are all one nation. If you are an American, it doesn't matter when or how you became a citizen, you are still a child of the Founders and beneficiaries of their work.

Have we lived up to the promise of equality for all people? No. Are we a country without lines of nationality, race, or class? No. Do “-isms” of all kinds remain? Yes.

But the Founders' promise of equal treatment for all people has not been forgotten and I believe that that promise is rooted in Scripture itself and Christians will not let it be ignored.

So we can see that there's a close resemblance between some of the ideals we find in our nation's founding documents and what we find in the Bible. Now we have to follow the paper trail and connect the dots. They'll lead us from Saint Paul to John Calvin to John Witherspoon to James Madison. If we can make all the connections we'll have unraveled the mystery of America's unique government.

Presbyterians draw their theology from the "Reformed" tradition of faith; John Calvin is the most important articulator of the "Reformed" worldview. Now Calvin wasn't just a theologian; he also had the quite practical task of governing Geneva, Switzerland, during a time of radical upheaval all around him. Kings were consolidating their power and the most influential political philosopher of the day was Machiavelli, author of "The Prince," who advocated a ruthless form of benevolent dictatorship. At the same time the Roman Catholic papacy was centralizing its authority in response to threats posed by the Protestant movement of Martin Luther.

It was against this background that, drawing on Saint Paul's teachings, Calvin established a system of governance in Geneva that – for all its limitations when compared with modern democracies – was revolutionary in its principles. For the first time members of the church were allowed to elect their own pastors and elders – instead of being appointed by Kings or Popes. And Calvin so understood the potential for power to corrupt individuals that he intentionally vested power in groups of people – such as a Presbytery – rather than in a solo Bishop. In fact, the way the early Presbyterian church was organized – with systems of checks and balances built right into it – derived from Calvin's understanding that even the best of us are liable to corruption.

Enter Dr. John Witherspoon about 200 years later. Witherspoon was a Calvinist and the only pastor to sign the Declaration of Independence. In the English press, Witherspoon was lampooned for his radical preaching as "Dr. Silverspoon, Preacher of Sedition." He was just one of a whole host of prominent Presbyterians who called the colonists to revolt.

Not only did Witherspoon influence his congregations, he also influenced generations of students. In addition to preaching, Witherspoon also served as President of The College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University). One of his students in the class of 1772 was a young man named James Madison. It was at Witherspoon's feet that Madison learned the concepts of good governance that Madison eventually incorporated into the framework of our own government when he helped to author the United States Constitution. We can see how Reformed principles were built into our nation's DNA when we consider that Witherspoon's students included not only Madison and Aaron Burr (who became vice president), but also

37 judges, three of whom made it to the Supreme Court, 10 Cabinet officers; 12 members of the Continental Congress, 28 U.S. senators, and 49 United States congressmen.

Wikipedia

What can we take from all this?

Patriotic concepts like servant leadership, consent of the governed, and equality of all people aren't just *good* ideas, they are *God* ideas.

Ideas matter. And because ideas matter theology matters. In his theology John Calvin planted seeds of democratic thought that bloomed about two hundred years later and three thousand miles away. I'm just crazy enough to believe that what preachers and theologians are saying today matters, too, because – to the extent that people are listening – those people are being shaped by God's Word; they, in turn, will shape God's world.

Christians need to be involved in government work at every level. Some denominations pull away from involvement in community affairs; Presbyterians see such work as a Christian duty. We have a unique perspective to offer and we can help hold governments accountable to their unique and even sacred duties. Amen.

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