

### Church History, Lesson 27

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

#### The religious atmosphere around the time of independence...

- Many conservative Christians have assumed that the United States of America was founded as a "Christian nation" because the founding fathers referred to God as providentially arranging the circumstances of the founding of our nation and because of the respect that they had for the Scriptures. However, it would be better see the founding of the U.S.A. as influenced by Christianity.
- Some of our founding fathers were gospel believing Christians, others however, were deists who saw "God's providence" as something more like "manifest destiny". They saw the doctrine of God's sovereignty and providence as God working through circumstances to give the nation the freedom to expand and humanity the freedom to progress.
- Some quotes:

George Washington - "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of Patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian."

--*The Writings of Washington*, pp. 342-343.

John Adams - "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! Every member would be obliged in conscience, to temperance, frugality, and industry; to justice, kindness, and charity towards his fellow men; and to piety, love, and reverence toward Almighty God ... What a Eutopia, what a Paradise would this region be."

--*Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, Vol. III, p. 9.

Benjamin Franklin - "Here is my Creed.

I believe in one God, the Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by His Providence. That He ought to be worshipped.

"That the most acceptable service we render to him is in doing good to his other children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever sect I meet with them.

"As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, is the best the world ever saw, or is likely to see;

"But I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the good consequence, as probably it has, of making his doctrines more respected and more observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any peculiar marks of his displeasure."

--Benjamin Franklin wrote this in a letter to Ezra Stiles, President of Yale University on March 9, 1790.

Thomas Jefferson – "I am a real Christian – that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus Christ."

--*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 385.

Roger Sherman – (Signer of the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution) -

"I believe that there is one only living and true God, existing in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the same in substance equal in power and glory. That the scriptures of the old and new testaments are a revelation from God, and a complete rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him. That God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, so as thereby he is not the author or approver of sin. That he creates all things, and preserves and governs all creatures and all their actions, in a manner perfectly consistent with the freedom of will in moral agents, and the usefulness of means. That he made man at first perfectly holy, that the first man sinned, and as he was the public head of his posterity, they all became sinners in consequence of his first transgression, are wholly indisposed to that which is good and inclined to evil, and on account of sin are liable to all the miseries of this life, to death, and to the pains of hell forever.

"I believe that God having elected some of mankind to eternal life, did send his own Son to become man, die in the room and stead of sinners and thus to lay a foundation for the offer of pardon and salvation to all mankind, so as all may be saved who are willing to accept the gospel offer: also by his special grace and spirit, to regenerate, sanctify and enable to persevere in holiness, all who shall be saved; and to procure in consequence of their repentance and faith in himself their justification by virtue of his atonement as the only meritorious cause...

"I believe that the souls of believers are at their death made perfectly holy, and immediately taken to glory: that at the end of this world there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a final judgement of all mankind, when the righteous shall be publicly acquitted by Christ the Judge and admitted to everlasting life and glory, and the wicked be sentenced to everlasting punishment."

--*The Life of Roger Sherman*, pp. 272-273.

Benjamin Rush – (Signer of the Declaration of Independence and Ratifier of the U.S. Constitution) -

"The gospel of Jesus Christ prescribes the wisest rules for just conduct in every situation of life. Happy they who are enabled to obey them in all situations!"

--*The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, pp. 165-166.

"If moral precepts alone could have reformed mankind, the mission of the Son of God into all the world would have been unnecessary.

The perfect morality of the gospel rests upon the doctrine which, though often controverted has never been refuted: I mean the vicarious life and death of the Son of God."

--*Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical*, published in 1798.

### **So... this religiously mixed atmosphere led to several things...**

- The view of God and His providence over the world as basically a freedom for humanity to progress led to a pursuit of "natural religion" that would leave behind the "dogmas" of traditional Christianity which had led to so much oppression and war in Europe.

This pursuit led toward two new "religions":

- Unitarianism received its name because it rejected the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity. However, it questioned most points of Christian orthodoxy.
- Universalism was a religious expression of American optimism. Universalists believe that in the end, all will be saved. It was introduced by British Methodists who believed that the doctrine of damnation was a denial of God's love.
- The religious pluralism of the original colonies, the founding fathers, and the general atmosphere around the revolutionary war led to RELIGIOUS FREEDOM and the rise of denominations. American Christians had to view denominations as expressions of personal beliefs and convictions and the church as an invisible body to which all true believers belonged.
- At the same time, freedom of movement and immigration led to so many Catholic immigrants coming to the U.S.A. that by the mid 1800's Catholicism was the largest religious body in America.

### **The Second Great Awakening:**

- So... this mix of religious freedom and pluralism, doctrinal heresies, and the moral and spiritual “fog of war” left over from the Revolutionary War made some long for a religious revival.
- The Second Great Awakening began in New England. Initially, it was NOT characterized by emotional outbursts. Church attendance and Christian devotion dramatically increased. Many were truly converted.
- The early days of this awakening especially influenced distinguished theologians and was promoted by Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale University and the grandson of Jonathan Edwards.
- The Second Great Awakening resulted in the founding of many “societies” for mission work and for social reform. These included:
  - The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (the “Haystack Five”)
  - The American Bible Society
  - The General Convention of Baptists
  - An abolitionist movement called The American Colonization Society, which bought slaves, freed them, and repatriated them to Africa.
  - The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance
  - The Women’s Christian Temperance Union
- The Second Great Awakening also moved west with the frontier. As it expanded from New England and moved west, it was characterized by more emotion and was less intellectual.
- The Cane Ridge Revival of 1801 was a significant milestone in this transformation.
  - The Cane Ridge Revival was organized by a local Presbyterian pastor who a “great assembly” or “camp meeting” to promote a deeper faith.
  - Some came to worship; some came to party!  
A critic of the awakening later claimed that at Cane Ridge as many souls were conceived as were saved.
  - However, the response to the call to repentance was surprising and dramatic. Some came under such conviction that they trembled and wept. Others were so overwhelmed that they ran around, barked like dogs, or laughed uncontrollably.
  - This “camp meeting” / periodic “revival meeting” approach became a common way to evangelize and revive religious commitment.
  - The Presbyterians however were opposed to such outbursts and began taking action against ministers who participated in similar meetings.
  - The Methodists and Baptists however, used this methodology regularly and consequently grew significantly in the south and west.
- One of the leading “revivalists” of the Second Great Awakening was Charles Grandison Finney (1792 – 1875). He was known to use more manipulative methods during his revival meetings than had previously been popular. But more concerning was his theory that a preacher could “make converts” and bring revival by fulfilling all the right conditions.  
Finney travelled as an evangelist / revivalist from about 1825 – 1835. During this time there was a very famous revival in Rochester, NY. It was said that during his campaign there (Sept. 1830 – March 1831) the population of Rochester increased by two thirds but that crime decreased by two thirds.
- Finney himself settled in Oberlin, OH as president of Oberlin College. He used this as a base to work for social change, especially abolition of slavery. (Oberlin was the first college in the U.S. to accept both women and blacks as students.)

AUTHOR: John Winthrop (1588–1649)

QUOTATION: For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. Soe that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.

ATTRIBUTION: JOHN WINTHROP, governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” discourse written aboard the Arbella during the voyage to Massachusetts, 1630.—Robert C. Winthrop, *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, p. 19 (1867).