

INTRODUCTION

Today I'm starting a new series called, "Heal Our Land." It is my desire to call our church and our nation to turn back to the God who made us into a great nation. Two weeks from today, our Congressman Louie Gohmert will be here to talk about our nation's Christian heritage. Three weeks from today, Mike Parks and our Celebration Choir and Orchestra will present the 25th I LOVE AMERICA celebration.

A Sunday School teacher asked her students, "What was the name of the first man?" And a student held up his hand and said, "I know. The first man was George Washington." And the teacher said, "No, the first man was named Adam." And the little boy said, "Well, I guess if you're including foreigners, you're right."

He was thinking only about America. Over the next few weeks I want us to be thinking about our nation. Where we are and how we got here. But before we talk about where we are and where our nation seems to be going. I want us to first stop and consider how our nation started well.

Our Founding Fathers knew their Bibles. Of all the documents gathered from our Founding Fathers, which includes their letters and deliberations, the Bible was quoted more than any other book. Our Founding Fathers believed passages like Psalm 33:10-12 which says, "The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance."

Plenty of people are talking about what's wrong with America, and I'll be addressing that as well. But in this first message I want to remind you about what's RIGHT about America. America is in trouble morally and spiritually. But I have hope, because our nation has sturdy moral and spiritual roots that dig down deeply into our national culture. The tree is sick and there's not much fruit, but the roots are strong. That's what leads me to believe that America can still be a great God-fearing; God-honoring nation. Let me share four GOOD things about America's beginning.

1. People looking for religious freedom settled in our land

The French and the Spanish traveled to the New World looking for conquest. They carried priests with them to claim the lands for the Catholic Church. But they sent armies and looking for territory and gold—and they found it. They killed thousands of Native Americans in their greed.

But the English and other Europeans came for a different reason. They came searching for a place where they could practice their faith. They weren't trying to get away from something, they were trying to find something, and that was freedom to worship. You all are familiar, of course, with the Pilgrims who came there to Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower. Just as they landed, they joined together in what is called the Mayflower Compact in 1620. These are the words of the Mayflower Compact: "In the name of God, amen. Having undertaken for the glory

of God and for the advancement of the Christian faith, do solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, covenant and combine ourselves together.”

Many of the first settlers believed the words of Jesus when He said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14)

Those words drove these religious pilgrims to find a place where they could build a city like that. The second wave of English settlers was led by a wealthy landowner named John Winthrop. They settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1630 he preached a sermon to his fellow Puritans in which he said, “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all the people are upon us.” (From his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity”)

Baptists were a part of those seeking religious freedom on our shores. Roger Williams established the first Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island in 1638. He started the church so that Baptists who were suffering persecution in Europe would have a place where they could openly practice their faith. Williams was also one of the first missionaries to take the Gospel to the Native Americans.

In 1643, more and more people came to the shores and up in New England; they formed a confederation called The New England Confederation. Their constitution was the first constitution signed on American soil. It began: “Whereas we all came into these parts with one and the same end and aim, namely to advance the kingdom of our lord Jesus Christ, and to enjoy the liberties of the gospel in purity and peace.”

So you cannot deny our deep Christian roots. This land was populated with people seeking religious liberty. They came seeking to build a city set upon a hill to be a witness to the world.

2. America was protected and directed by God from the start

There are historical revisionists today who have tried to rewrite America’s history to remove any reference to how God protected our forefathers.

For instance, until about sixty years ago, many of the history textbooks taught about an amazing episode in the life of George Washington. Twenty years before the Declaration of Independence, many of the colonists fought alongside the British during the French and Indian War. It was a war over disputed territory around current day Pittsburg.

George Washington was a Colonel fighting for the British under the leadership of General William Braddock. During the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755, Braddock’s forces were defeated by the French and Indians who were firing their weapons from behind rocks and trees while the British Forces were lined up in the open. Braddock was mortally wounded in the Battle, but Colonel Washington continued to rally the troops. Even though 2/3 of the British troops were killed or injured. Colonel Washington was able to halt the advance of the French and Indians and lead the remaining troops to retreat. It was a resounding defeat, and word spread that George Washington had been killed in battle.

A few days later, George Washington wrote a letter to his younger brother, John Augustine and reported that he was indeed alive, but had been miraculously protected. On July 18, 1755 he wrote that the battle had been fierce "...But, by the All-powerful Dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me; yet escaped unhurt, altho Death was leveling my Companions on every side of me!"

Fifteen years later, Washington was back in the area and an old chief who had fought in the battle requested to meet the man who had been protected by the Great Spirit. He said to Washington: "You are the man who was divinely protected by God. In that battle I directed my warriors to aim their muskets at you because we knew if we would shoot the leader, the troops would disband. I myself believe I shot you 13 times. And yet you never died."

School children read about that miraculous episode for several generations. But now it has been sanitized from our history. Why? Because it sounds as if the story is humanly impossible; and public education is based on humanism. I thank God for every Christian student, teacher, and administrator in our public schools. But you know it is a mission field.

What a beautiful picture it is for us to see in our mind and also see on canvas George Washington kneeling in the snow at Valley Forge praying for God to intervene and to protect and guide them. And if you know anything about the Revolutionary War, there were times when they were barely hanging by a thread. The British army was the strongest, most well-equipped army in the world at that time. And the Americans were just a bunch of rag-tag farmers. Not trained. But God gave us victory.

History has been re-written to remove any God-talk from the public conversation, but you cannot deny the primary sources of history in our nation. For instance, we all know George Washington was elected as our first President. Did you know that his first official duty as President was to pray and ask God's blessing on our nation? He said: "It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States..." His entire speech took less than fifteen minutes and he made reference to God eight times.

From the beginning, our leaders depended on God and saw America as a city of light set upon a hill being a testimony of goodness and righteousness to the rest of the world.

3. Men who recognized God's rule designed our government

Our forefathers weren't perfect. Like us, they were all sinful men who struggled with their faith. But they all knew the Bible, because it had been their textbook at every level of their education. But all of them agreed there is a God in heaven who rules over the affairs of men.

When these men were struggling to write our first Constitution, Benjamin Franklin made a motion that he hoped would break the gridlock. After five months of deliberations, he stood and

said on June 28, 1778, "I have lived, Sir, a long time (he was 72 at the time), and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth that God Governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that 'except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better, than the Builders of Babel. I therefore beg leave to move—that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the Clergy of this City be requested to officiate in that Service."

They had local pastors come in and start each session with prayer and within ten weeks, they had completed the Constitution. Our forefathers designed a different kind of government than had ever been formed. And when you read the original discussions, you can see they used the Bible as a pattern. For instance, our forefathers designed our government with three branches. This three-fold division of powers can be seen in the nature of God. The Bible says, "For the Lord is our Judge [Judicial], our Lawgiver [Legislative], and our King [Executive]. It is He who will save us." (Isaiah 33:22)

One of the most radical aspects of our government's design was the separation of church and state. From the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, throughout the history of the Holy Roman Empire, all the way to the Church of England, there had been a close alliance between the church and state. Even today in Europe taxpayers subsidize the churches, whether they attend church or not. For instance the Church of England receives about 15 million pounds from the government each year. In Germany, last year the Lutheran Church received \$13 million from the government in the form of taxes that were collected.

But our founders decided to do something revolutionary. They loved their churches, but they didn't want to form a state church, and they didn't want to collect taxes FROM the churches, or give tax money TO the churches. Where did they get this novel idea? From the Bible. We read in Ezra, "You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God." (Ezra 7:24)

The men who framed our constitution had an understanding of Biblical principles. Some of these principles are woven into our government's design.

4. Our first laws guarantee our right to practice and proclaim our faith

If you remember from high school civics, there are basically four kinds of governments. There is a monarchy, which is a rule by one, a king. There is an oligarchy, which is a rule by a few. Next, there is a democracy, which is a rule by the majority of the people. Then there is a republic, which is a rule by law. Actually, there's a fifth kind of government, which is anarchy, which is a rule by nobody.

So are we a democracy or a republic? Many Americans think we are a democracy; but we are a republic. We say, "I pledge allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stands." We are a republic where we elect our leaders through a democratic process.

So what's the difference? What if a majority of citizens decided churches shouldn't be tax exempt anymore? Could they just vote it away? No, we have a law protecting that. We can change laws, but that's a much more difficult process; that's why our founders designed our government to be a republic. So in America we can't really say, "The majority rules." Instead, we say, "It's the law of the land."

It's a great system. Modern France has had fifteen types of governments, and Italy has had forty-eight different governments. But our republic had stood strong for the past twenty-four decades. When our founding fathers were writing laws to protect our rights, religious freedom was the very first law. Our first amendments says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

But in the past sixty years, our religious freedom has been under attack. Let's take prayer as an example. Prayer has always been a part of our public life since our nation was founded. But the Supreme Court has been systematically dismantling prayer from the public square. They say prayer is fine in the church house, and in your home, but prayer has been outlawed public schools, and other public venues like graduation.

A few years ago, a high school in Peoria, Illinois, was sued by the ACLU for keeping an 80-year tradition of having a prayer of blessing at the graduation. Days before the graduation, the court banned prayer at the ceremony. But one of the students giving a speech paused, bowed his head in silent prayer and then he faked a sneeze. This was all prearranged because after he sneezed, the entire audience and graduates shouted, "God bless you!"

Our nation has turned from prayer and faith in an alarming way. Let me show you how drastic a reversal has taken place. A little over a hundred years ago the Supreme Court ruled that we are basically a Christian nation. In 1892 the U.S. Supreme Court cited and agreed with the ruling of the Supreme Court of New York which stated: "The people of this State, in common with the people of this country, profess the general doctrines of Christianity, as the rule of their faith and practice...We are a Christian people, and the morality of the country is deeply engrafted upon Christianity."

And exactly seventy years later, in 1962, our Supreme Court voted 6-1 with two abstentions that ruled that a simple school prayer consisting of twenty-words was unconstitutional. Here's the text of the offensive prayer: "To the Almighty God, We acknowledge our dependence On Thee, we ask Thy blessings upon us, Our parents, our teachers, and our country. Amen."

In one ruling, 40 million school children were forbidden to do what every classroom had been doing since the founding of our nation. They were forbidden from starting the day acknowledging and asking for the blessing of God upon our nation. Next to fall was Bible

reading. And soon to follow was legalized abortion. And this month, these nine judges will rule on changing God's definition of marriage. The hits just keep on coming.

Has our nation changed? Absolutely. Has our nation changed for the better? Absolutely not. In the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s there were two incidents of violence on a school campus. In the last ten years there have been fifty-eight cases of violence on school campuses. We've come a long way since our nation was founded. And we have been going the wrong way for the past six decades. America needs to make a U-turn and turn back to God.

CONCLUSION

America had a great beginning. It was the dream of the first settlers to build a city upon a hill that would be a moral and spiritual example to the world. For many years the light shone brightly.

President Ronald Reagan spoke often about America as a city set upon a hill. In his farewell address to the American people in 1988, he said, "I've thought a bit of the 'shining city upon a hill.' The phrase comes from John Winthrop who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim who journeyed here on a little wooden boat looking for a home that would be free. I've spoken of the city set on a hill all my political life, but I never communicated what I saw when I said it. In my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than the oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace. After 200 years, she still stands true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm."

I agree, the light has held steady, but I believe this light of moral and spiritual influence is growing weaker. It is our job to fan the flame of freedom before it goes out.

Our only hope is not the one sitting in the White House. Our only hope is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who sits enthroned in the heavens.

It was also Ronald Reagan who said, "America is great because she is good. If America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

The solution is simple. God says, "If my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14) Let's storm heaven with our prayers and humbly ask God to heal our land.

OUTLINE

1. People looking for religious freedom settled in our land.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." *Matthew 5:14*

"We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all the people are upon us." (John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630)

2. America was protected and directed by God from the start.
3. Men who recognized God's rule designed our government.
4. Our first laws guarantee our right to practice and proclaim our faith.

Amendment I

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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