

Is America's Covenant With God Up For Renewal This Year?

Was America founded on a covenant with God? There is no question that the earliest immigrants to America, especially in New England, built their communities on the belief that they, as a people, had a sacred covenant with God. They believed that if they kept their part of the covenant, they would be blessed; but if they broke the covenant they would not be blessed and probably suffer irreparable harm.

This was clearly expressed by John Winthrop who, in 1630, led a flotilla of eleven ships with 700 passengers to New England where they founded the city of Boston and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop wrote,

We have entered into an explicit Covenant with God. We have drawn up indentures with the Almighty, wherefore if we succeed and do not let ourselves be diverted into making money, He will reward us. Whereas if we fail, if we fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, the Lord will surely break out in wrath and make us know the price of the breach of such a Covenant.

The Truth About the Mayflower Compact

Ten years before Winthrop and his company arrived, the Pilgrims had landed at Cape Cod. Before disembarking, they drew up a written document patterned after the church covenants that were common among Separatist churches in England. Being part of a Separatist congregation, they were very aware of such documents, which knit the signees together in a solemn contractual agreement with God and one another.

In this situation, the Pilgrims realized they were more than a church for there were "strangers" on board the Mayflower who

were not a part of their congregation, but had been recruited by the businessmen who funded the voyage. They, therefore, used the words “civil body politic” to describe this new community they were forming.

Each signee promised “solemnly and mutually in the presence of God” to “covenant together” for the better ordering and preservation of their community. This covenant also stated that their purpose in coming to the New World was to glorify God and advance the Christian faith. The late Harvard professor Perry Miller, said, “The Separatists aboard the Mayflower found a covenant the obvious answer to the first problem of political organization.”

Some have called the Mayflower Compact America’s founding document. That is going too far, but there is no question that it set the stage for succeeding communities and colonies that would base their existence on written documents—covenants—that gave recognition to God and prioritized the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the reason for their existence.

New England Covenants with God

As we have seen, this idea of a social covenant with God was expressed, not only by the Pilgrims, but also by John Winthrop in the founding of Boston and Massachusetts. It was also clearly expressed in the 1639 founding document of Connecticut, entitled “The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut,” which states,

We, the inhabitants and residents of Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield, knowing where a people are gathered together the word of God requires that to maintain the peace and union of such a people there ought to be an orderly and decent government established according to God . . . we do for ourselves and our successors enter into combination and confederation together, to maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we

now profess. (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 48-49).

With thousands of new immigrants arriving in New England and new towns springing up, there arose a felt need for some sort of centralized government to facilitate mutual defense and to arbitrate land disputes. The United Colonies of New England was, therefore, formed and a constitution patterned on the idea of covenant was formulated. Dated May 19, 1643, the opening statement of the constitution expressly states why they had all come to the New World. It reads,

Whereas we all came into these parts of America with one and the same end and aim, namely to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and enjoy the Liberties of the Gospel in purity and peace (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 52-53).

The constitution provided that each colony would choose two representatives who would form a council of eight. This council of eight was invested with power to arbitrate boundary disputes, coordinate mutual defense, and facilitate mutual advice and support. It was clearly stated that this council was also brought into existence for "preserving and propagating the truth and liberties of the gospel (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 53).

There is no question that this constitutional system wherein each individual colony retained its autonomy, and the powers of government were limited by the constitution, was a forerunner of the federalist system that would be created at Philadelphia in 1776 and 1787. The United Colonies of New England clearly foreshadowed the United States of America in both its form of government and in its Christian character.

The Puritans clearly saw these written statements as covenants, not only between themselves, but also between their society and God. They believed that God dealt, not only with individuals, but also with social units, including families,

churches and nations. According to Perry Miller, "The central conception in their thought is the elaborated doctrine of covenant."

The Blessing and Responsibility of Covenant

The Puritans saw Israel in the Old Testament as a pattern for their social covenant with God. Like Israel, they believed that if they, as a people, kept their part of the covenant, which was to walk uprightly and make His name known, they would be blessed. If, on the other hand, they lost their sense of purpose and began to live selfish and sinful lives, they would suffer God's wrath because of their rejection of the covenant. During the voyage to New England, Winthrop warned,

Now if the Lord shall please to bear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He verified this Covenant and sealed our commission . . . but if we fail to perform the terms of the Covenant, we shall perish out the land we are crossing the sea to possess.

This sense of social responsibility to God is the reason the Puritans tended to hold one another accountable. They pointed out that since communities and nations cannot be rewarded in the next world, they must necessarily be rewarded in this one, according to their deeds. The sin of one or a few could, therefore, bring down God's judgment on the entire community. This is also the reason that laws were passed outlawing adultery, fornication, profanity, drunkenness and Sabbath breaking.

Virginia Covenants with God

Although New England was where the writing of constitutions was profoundly developed, all the colonies were founded on similar social compacts with God. Take Virginia, for example. When the Jamestown settlers disembarked at Cape Henry, Virginia, their first act was to erect a seven-foot oak cross they had brought from England. They then gathered around the

cross for a prayer service in which they dedicated the land of their new home to God. In his dedicatory prayer, their chaplain, Rev. Robert Hunt, declared, "From these very shores the Gospel shall go forth to not only this New World but to the entire world."

This act was in line with the official Virginia Charter, which recognized "the Providence of Almighty God" and expressed the desire that the establishment of the colony would "tend to the glory of His Divine Majesty." This document also expressly stated that the purpose of the colony was to propagate the "Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God."

There are amazing similarities between the Virginia Charter, the Mayflower Compact and other founding documents of New England. This led Perry Miller to suggest that Virginia and New England were not that different. He pointed out that both communities were children of the Reformation, "and what we consider distinctively Puritan was really the spirit of the times." The same could be said of Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and other colonies that were founded on written documents that gave honor to God and expressed the reason for their existence.

These early immigrants were not perfect and they obviously made human mistakes. However, there is no question of the sincerity of their vision to establish a Christian society based on a covenant with God. And there is no question that their covenants were precursors to the founding documents of the United States of America. Gary Amos and Richard Gardiner are thus correct to say, "The early New England constitutions were covenants. These covenants clearly foreshadowed the United States Constitution."

God and America's Founding Documents

The Declaration of Independence begins with an acknowledgement

that human rights come from God. Three names for God drawn directly from the Judeo-Christian tradition were used. They are "Creator," "Supreme Judge" and "Divine Providence." The Declaration ends with the signees expressing a reliance on "Divine Providence," a common expression of that era for the God of the Bible. It was commonly used by revivalist ministers, such as George Whitefield, in their sermons and writings.

Concerning the Constitution, it is obvious that the founders saw the Constitution as a sacred document, and they treated it as a covenant. That is why George Washington took the oath of office with his hand on a Bible, and with his hand on the Bible, solemnly swore "to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God." It was also Washington who said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."

Indeed, many of those who were part of the Constitutional Convention, saw the hand of God in the formulation of the Constitution. James Madison, the Constitution's chief architect, declared, "It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in critical stages of the Revolution."

Benjamin Rush, a signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, was even more blunt, declaring that the Constitution was a work from heaven. A physician from Philadelphia, he asserted that he "as much believed the hand of God was employed in this work as that God had divided the Red Sea to give a passage to the children of Israel, or had fulminated the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai."

This sacred view of the Constitution was obviously inherited from those early Puritans who considered their covenants to be sacred oaths between their communities and God. This

covenantal attitude became a part of the psyche of colonial America and was clearly present in the attitude of the founders toward America's founding documents. Historian, Benjamin Hart says,

The U.S. Constitution has worked because there has been a sacred aura surrounding the document; it has been something more than a legal contract; it was a covenant, an oath before God, very much related to the covenant the Pilgrims signed. Indeed, when the president takes his oath of office he places his hand on a Bible and swears before Almighty God to uphold the Constitution of the United States. He makes a sacred promise; and the same holds true for Supreme Court justices who take an oath to follow the letter of the written Constitution. The moment America's leaders begin treating the Constitution as though it were a mere sheet of paper is the moment the American Republic—or American covenant—ends.

Where We Stand Today

America's covenant with the Almighty has been sustained by periodic spiritual awakenings that have swept across the land, renewing faith and virtue in her inhabitants. This is what the Founders had counted on, for they all agreed that only a vibrant Christian and virtuous people could sustain the Constitutional Republic they had formed.

John Adams, America's second president, made this clear in an address to the officers of the Massachusetts Militia in 1798. He said,

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious [Christian] people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 172-73).

America is at a critical juncture in her history. Powerful forces reject the notion of God having any role in the

nation's founding, and they consider the Constitution to be a useless, outdated document—a mere sheet of paper, as Hart warned. Professor Steven Hayward also warned, “Is there any doubt that if liberals had their way, they would junk the U.S. Constitution and install one that enshrines liberal ideology?”

America is at a tipping point where the scales could be tipped in either direction. If the church continues to embrace a self-serving, comfortable Christianity, America will go down the path of so many once great nations of history. For make no mistake about it, it was not human pedigree, ingenuity or superiority that made America great; it was God's blessing through the covenant our forefathers and foremothers made with Him.

The election of Donald Trump was an act of Divine Providence that opened a narrow window of opportunity for the church in America. Will we make the most of this opportunity and maximize this moment? Will we let go of our comfortable Christianity and become serious about being His covenant people?

The ball is in our court. The decision is ours. Will “we the people” renew the covenant in 2018? If we respond in sincere faith with corresponding acts, 2018 could be a very powerful year for the church in America. {eo}

*This article was derived in part from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt's** book, Pilgrims and Patriots, with the subtitle, The Radical Christian Roots of American Democracy and Freedom. Dr. Hyatt has a vision for another Great Awakening in America. Check out his website at [and if you would like to schedule him to speak in your church or city, contact him at \[dreddiehyatt@\]\(mailto:dreddiehyatt@\)](#).*