

President Obama Needs a Great Awakening

“We are in the midst of a constitutional crisis with sweeping implications for our system of government,” was the message from Jonathan Turley, constitutional lawyer and Professor of Law at the George Washington University School of Law. He and others were testifying before a congressional committee about the president’s unprecedented use of “executive order” to make and change laws, a power that the Constitution reserves exclusively for the legislative branch of government.

The Constitution’s Division of Powers Is Based on the Biblical Worldview of the Founders

America’s Founders divided the powers of government and provided various checks and balances because they held to a Biblical world-view, which recognizes that “man” in his present condition is flawed because of sin and cannot be trusted with “power.” They would agree with the adage of Sir John Dalberg-Acton who, after extensive studies of both secular and religious history, declared, “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

This was the view of the early Puritans to whom the Founders were indebted for much of their thinking. Most of them would have agreed with William Bradford, five-time governor of Plymouth Colony, who spoke of “man’s fallen state” and declared that “all men have corruption in them.” In this fallen state human beings cannot be trusted with power; hence the division of powers and other checks and balances in our country’s founding documents.

Clueless, Power-Hungry Politicians

Our president seems unaware of this world-view of fallen and flawed humanity as the basis for the limits placed on the

different branches of government by our Constitution. This was made obvious when he recently remarked, "That's the good thing about being president; I can do whatever I want."

Although the statement has a particular context, it seems to reveal an unhealthy and uninformed attitude and mindset about the executive office. The Founders placed clearly defined limits on what a president can and cannot do; because the Founders knew that the president, whoever he may be, is also a flawed human being, and not to be trusted with "power."

Benjamin Hart stated it well in his excellent treatise, "Faith and Freedom." He wrote:

Whether one talks about a priest or king makes little difference since both are subject to original sin. The corruption in human nature is magnified when it is transferred to human institutions. A man with a gang is far more dangerous than a man without a gang. With this view of man in mind, America's founders sought to decentralize political authority, through the separation of powers, states' rights, executive veto, judicial review of legislation, specifically enumerated governmental responsibilities, and all the various checks and balances that were instituted to prevent government from dominating all of life (Benjamin Hart, Faith & Freedom, 39).

The problem, of course, is by no means confined to the current president and his political party. Washington, D.C. is filled with power-hungry politicians on both sides of the political aisle who seem all too willing to sell their souls in order to gain and maintain political power and control. The current condition of our capital city surely confirms the statement of Dalberg-Acton that, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The Founders Did Not Trust Power in the Hands of One or a Few

The underlying problem is that our society has given up the biblical view of the flawed human condition, held by the

Founders, that was the basis for their decision to divide the powers of government. They were, in fact, so intent on limiting individual power that they also, in Section 9 of the Constitution, forbade the government from granting honorific titles of nobility to anyone and forbade anyone holding a government office from accepting a title or office from a foreign king or state without the consent of Congress.

The Founders held the traditional Christian belief that humanity had been created a noble creature in the image and likeness of God, but that this image had become flawed as a result of the fall and sin (Genesis 1-3). Salvation through Jesus Christ restores this image, but this restoration is a process that is not completed in this world. Humanity—even Christian humanity—in this flawed condition cannot be trusted with unlimited power.

Whereas modern liberalism claims that human nature is essentially good and that people only need a change of environment and circumstances to improve and perfect their behavior, the Founders held no such utopian view of the human condition. In fact, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, both signers of the Constitution, pointed to Jeremiah 17:9 as an underlying principle for the separation of powers provided for in that document. This passage reads, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

The Bible and the Great Awakening Influenced the Founders

It was this belief in the biblical account of the fall and the resulting flawed condition of human nature that prompted the Founders to divide the powers of government between two legislative branches, an executive branch, and a judicial branch. The Founders’ view in this regard was profoundly influenced by the radical form of Protestant Christianity that, from the very beginning, was dominant in early America,

and was renewed as a result of the Great Awakening.

The influence of the Great Awakening on the Founders was highlighted by the late Harvard professor, Perry Miller, who said, "The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was a direct result of the preaching of the evangelists of the Great Awakening." In their well-researched book, *Never Before in History: America's Inspired Birth*, Gary Amos and Richard Gardiner say, "The majority of people who founded the United States of America either experienced or were children of those who experienced the religious awakening of the 1740s."

This Awakening, with its stress on human sinfulness, revitalized the mistrust of the colonists in human authority, and this mistrust was reflected in the actions of the Founders. Benjamin Franklin, for example, refers to this emphasis of the Awakening on human sinfulness when, in his autobiography, he fondly reflects on his friendship with George Whitefield (1713-1770), the most famous preacher of the Awakening. He recalls how surprised he was at how much the masses admired and respected Whitefield, "notwithstanding his common abuse of them by assuring them they were naturally half-beasts and half-devils."

Franklin is, no doubt, using hyperbole here to point out that, in his preaching, Whitefield emphasized the fallen state of Adam's race and their need for a Savior. Because of this fallen condition, every person must experience a "new birth" through faith in Jesus Christ. This was the common message of the preachers of the Great Awakening.

James Madison Was Influenced by the Bible and the Great Awakening

James Madison (1751-1836), the chief architect of the Constitution, held this view of human sinfulness and this is seen in the limitations he placed on governmental power throughout the Constitution. He was referring to this view

when, in the Federalist Papers, he commented, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Madison was obviously influenced by the Great Awakening for he was trained at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), which was a center of revival activity during the Great Awakening, and afterward. In fact, just a few years before Madison arrived on campus, one of the trustees of the college, Samuel Finley, wrote;

Our glorious Redeemer has poured out His Holy Spirit upon the students at our College. The whole house was a Bochim (place of weeping). Mr. William Tennant, who was on the spot, says that there never was, he believes, more genuine sorrow for sin and longing after Jesus.

Some have wondered why there are no overt statements about God and Christ in the Constitution and founding documents. Madison, who was a brilliant thinker, was very aware that they were creating a civil government, not a church. He realized in writing the Constitution that he was constructing, not a Statement of Faith for a church, but a guiding document for a civil government that would guarantee individual rights and freedom for all sorts of religious sects and even atheists.

The Constitution Reflects a Biblical Worldview of Humanity

The biblical world-view of the document is seen in it limiting the powers of government and in disallowing titles of nobility being granted. These are principles right out of the New Testament. These are principles taught by Jesus when, for example, He warned His disciples about adopting honorific titles that would set them apart from the "brethren" (Matt. 23:8-12).

This principle of renouncing power was taught by Jesus when James and John requested the two most prominent seats in the kingdom and set off a storm of controversy between the disciples over who would be the greatest. Jesus called them

together, chided them for pursuing power and exhorted them that those who would be leaders in His kingdom must function as servants. This is where we get the concept of a leader being a “public servant.”

Concluding Thoughts

The sober and thoughtful view of the Founders about the human condition is foreign to modern society, and to much of the contemporary church. But the denial of the reality of sin and evil in the world is causing catastrophic problems both at home and on the world stage. Many leaders have a difficult time acknowledging and identifying evil, for in our modern politically-correct world, too many operate on the naive assumption that everyone is good and all cultures and religions are equal. Their mantra is “I’m OK—you’re OK.”

Another Great Awakening could awaken the church and the nation to the reality of sin and the flawed condition of human nature and the need of a Savior. It could bring about a humility on the part of both church and political leaders and stop the mad pursuits of power that are destroying the nation, churches and individual lives. It could actually put an end to the Constitutional crisis that is brewing.

This is why our second president, John Adams, said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people; it is wholly inadequate for any other.” This is why we must pray for another Great Awakening in our land.

Eddie L. Hyatt *is an author, historian, Bible teacher and ordained minister. This article is derived from his two most recent books, America’s Revival Heritage and Pursuing Power, both available from Amazon and his website.*