

Why We Should Bring Back the ‘Election Sermon’ Tradition

America’s founders freely intermingled Christian teachings and values with their civic elections. An early example of this was the establishment of the “Election Sermon” in New England in 1633. This statute provided that each year, at the time of the annual election of the governor and his assistants, a minister would be appointed to preach an “Election Sermon.”

This was a major event, attended by both religious and civic leaders. After the sermon was delivered, it was then printed and distributed throughout the colony. This tradition spread and continued for over 200 years. In 1860, the noted lawyer and historian John Wingate Thornton wrote:

The annual “Election Sermon”—a perpetual memorial, continued down through the generations from century to century—still bears witness that our fathers ever began their civil year and its responsibilities with an appeal to Heaven, and recognized Christian morality as the only basis of good laws (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 47).

Yes, in early America, it was considered a duty of Christian ministers to bring Christian values to bear upon politics and civic elections. The Johnson Amendment, passed in 1954, that prohibits nonprofits, including churches, from “participating” or “intervening” in elections, is completely out of sync with America’s founding generation.

One of the nation’s most prominent founders, John Witherspoon, was a man of deep faith and an ordained minister from Scotland. As a “dissenting Protestant,” he spent time in prison for refusing to compromise his faith. A brilliant scholar, he was eventually released and emigrated to America where he became president of the College of New Jersey.

In America, he also became a member of the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and he helped draft the Articles of Confederation. It was Witherspoon who authored the many calls for prayer and fasting that were published by the Congresses during the Revolutionary War.

Witherspoon and every other Founding Father would have considered it preposterous to think that he, a minister of the gospel, could not bring his moral values to bear on an election. He wrote, "God, grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 154).

Yes, the founders wanted ministers of the gospel to bring their message to bear upon the nation. This is why George Washington, after becoming commander in chief, appointed Christian chaplains throughout his army. This is why chaplains were appointed to Congress and continued the tradition, established by the Continental Congresses, of beginning each day's proceedings with prayer. The early chaplains also conducted Sunday services in the House Chamber every other week.

John Marshall, who served as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court from 1801-1835, made the Supreme Court facilities available to a local congregation for their Sunday gatherings. So, on Sunday morning, the singing of Christian hymns and the preaching of God's Word could be heard ringing through the chambers of both the House of Representatives and the Supreme Court. This was neither surprising nor offensive to anyone, for it fit perfectly within the mindset of the founding generation.

Washington and all the founders knew that the success of the Constitutional Republic they had formed hinged on the moral character of its citizens and their ability to govern themselves according to Christian values. This is why

President John Adams, in a 1798 address to the officers of the Massachusetts Militia, declared:

“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*, 173).

The Founding Fathers did not believe there could be liberty apart from virtue or freedom apart from morality. They were convinced that only Christianity offered the moral and intellectual underpinnings that would preserve the nation they had brought into existence.

They refused to “officially” endorse any particular creed or denomination, but they absolutely wanted ministers of the gospel to be free to declare gospel truth. As William Novak says, “The founders did not believe the constitutional government they were erecting could survive without Hebrew-Christian faith.”

Preaching an “Election Sermon” is the prerogative—and perhaps duty—of every minister and pastor in America, not promoting a political party, but bringing the truth of God to bear on the issues of the day. Even with the Johnson Amendment in place, you have a First Amendment right, not only to preach the gospel but to express your personal opinion from the pulpit or any other location. In the meantime, the Johnson Amendment should be removed, as it is totally out of sync with traditional American values of faith and freedom. {eo}

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